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ACROSS THE STREET

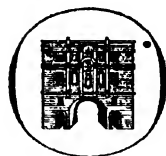
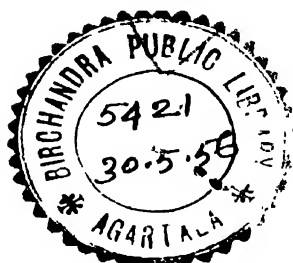
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MAIGRET SITS IT OUT
MAIGRET AND M. L'ABBE
IN TWO LATITUDES
AFFAIRS OF DESTINY
THE MAN WHO WATCHED
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THE SHADOW FALLS
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STRANGE INHERITANCE
POISONED RELATIONS
MAIGRET ON HOLIDAY
THE WINDOW OVER THE WAY
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THE STRANGERS IN THE HOUSE
THE BURGOMASTER OF FURNES
THE TRIAL OF BEBE DONGE
THE STAIN ON THE SNOW
AUNT JEANNE
ACT OF PASSION

ACROSS THE STREET

by

GEORGES SIMENON



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ACROSS THE STREET

Translated from the French

LA FENÊTRE DES ROUET

PART ONE

THE cheap ringing of an alarm-clock broke out behind the partition. Dominique jumped as though she were the one this interminable ringing was intended to rouse at three o'clock in the afternoon. A feeling of shame. Why? The common clatter brought back to her nothing but distressing, sordid, memories of illness, of sick-nursing at midnight or at dawn. But she had not been asleep, she had not even dozed off. Not for a second had her hand ceased plying the needle. Indeed, the instant before she had been like a circus horse forgotten at rehearsal, which goes on round and round and then pulls up short with a shudder on hearing the voice of an intruder.

How could the people in the next room, there behind the brown door, almost on top of her—how could they endure that insolent din? They had merely to stretch out an arm, without opening an eye, and fumble a way to the clock vibrating there on the side-table. Yet they did not: they did not budge. They were naked, she knew, flesh against flesh, entwined, with sweat glistening on their skins, and their hair sticking to their temples. They were happily at home in their warmth, in their atmosphere of animal humanity. Somebody was moving, somebody was stretching, eyelids blinked. There was a sleepy voice. It was the woman, mechanically seeking the man's body beside her own and stammering:

"Albert . . ."

. Dominique's fingers had not stopped. Her head had

remained bent over the dress she was darning under the sleeve, at the spot where all her dresses wore out, especially in summer, because she perspired.

She had been sewing for two hours, with tiny stitches, rebuilding a fabric as fine as that of the original white material with the mauve pattern; and now that her tenants' alarm clock had made her jump, she could not have said what she had been thinking about during those two hours. It was hot. Never had the air been so heavy. In the afternoon the sun beat full on this side of the Faubourg Saint Honoré. Dominique had closed her shutters, but she had not quite joined the two halves. She had left a vertical gap a few inches wide giving her a view of the buildings opposite: the molten sunlight poured through it, and on either side gleamed the narrower gaps set horizontally in the woodwork.

After a time this pattern of light, from which sprang a burning heat, etched itself on the eyes and brain. A sudden glance elsewhere projected it instantaneously on to the brown door, the wall or the floor.

Buses passed every two minutes. They could be felt, like enormous waves, breaking in the gulley of the street. There was something vicious in their brutality, particularly those climbing towards the Place des Ternes, as, with a sudden grinding of gears, they tackled the stiffening gradient in front of the house. Dominique was used to them, but it was the same as with the rays of the sun: she heard them in spite of herself and the noise penetrated her brain, leaving a humming aftermath. Surely the alarm next door had stopped? Yet she thought she heard it still. Perhaps the air was so heavy that it retained the imprints of sounds just as mud retains the track of passing feet. .

She could not see the ground floor opposite. She got a view of it only when she stood up. Yet certain images persisted. For example, the lemon-yellow front of the dairy; the name, in green, over the window—*Audebal*; the fruit and vegetables; the baskets on the pavement. And from time to time—despite the noises of the city, the blasts on the whistle of the policeman at the Haussmann crossing, the horns of the taxis, the bells of Saint-Philippe-du-Roule—a small familiar noise reached her, distinct from the others, the high-pitched bell of the dairy.

She was hot, although she was almost naked. She had never before done what she had done today. She had taken off her dress to mend it and had not put on another. She had remained in her slip. She was worried about it, a little ashamed. Two or three times she had nearly got up to put something on, especially when her glance fell on herself, when she felt the quivering of her breasts, which she could see, very white, very delicate, in the opening of her slip. Another sensation was queer and almost sexual—the beads of sweat breaking through her skin at almost equal intervals. It seemed to take a very long time. Impatience seized her, and at last the warm drop that had sprung out under an armpit trickled slowly down her side.

“Not now, Albert . . .”

A childish voice. Lina, in the room next door, was not twenty-two. She was a plump doll, rather soft, with reddish hair and russet lights playing pretty well all over her white flesh. Her voice was soft too, padded with animal well-being, and Dominique blushed, snapping her thread with the sharp action of all sempstresses. She didn't want to hear any more. She knew it, she was not mistaken—a

scratching noise was already heralding the gramophone record they played every time they "did it".

And they had not closed the shutters. They thought they were out of sight because the bed was at the far end of the room, where the sun did not reach, and because in this month of August most of the houses opposite were empty. But Dominique knew well enough that old Augustine, up there in one of the attics, was watching them.

At three o'clock in the afternoon! They slept no matter when, they lived no matter how; and the first thing they did when they got home was to undress. They were not proud and Dominique was the one who dared not cross the common drawing-room, the drawing-room which she had not let to them but which they must cross to get to the bathroom. Two or three times she had met Albert there quite naked, with a towel carelessly knotted about his middle.

They always played the same record, a tango they must have heard on some unforgettable occasion. Worse, there was a detail which rendered their presence still more palpable, so much so that their very movement seemed almost visible: when the record had finished, when only the scratching of the needle was to be heard, there was a kind of hesitancy lasting quite a time, a terrible silence, and it was nearly always Lina's voice that stammered:

"The record . . ."

The gramophone was set close by the bed; through the whispering and laughter could be visualised the movements the man made in order to reach it. . . .

He loved her. He loved her like an animal. He spent his life loving her, and he would do so in front of everybody.

When they went out shortly, they would still feel the need, even in the street, to press close against each other.

The dress was darned. It looked all the poorer so, poorer even for having been so well darned with such tiny stitches. The fabric had no substance left after so many washings and ironings. How many was it now? The mauve was for half mourning. That meant a year after her father's death. Four summers that she had been wearing that dress, washing it at six in the morning so that it should be dried and ironed by the time she had to go and do her shopping.

She raised her head. Yes, old Augustine was at her post, her elbows on the sill of her attic window, full of indignation, gazing down into the next room. For a second, now that she was on her feet, Dominique was tempted to take a couple of paces, to bend down, to look through the keyhole. She had done that sometimes.

Ten past three. She would put her dress on again. Then she would darn the stockings lying in the brown wicker-work basket, a basket which dated from the time of her grandmother, which had always contained stockings waiting to be darned, so that you might think they were always the same and that you could darn for century after century without exhausting it.

A reflection in the big rectangular mirror of the wardrobe, and suddenly Dominique, her nostrils pinched, let slip one shoulder-strap of her undergarment, then the other, as though by accident, and her burning eyes gazed at the mirror and the image, oh so white, of her breasts.

So white! Formerly it had never occurred to her to make a comparison, nor had she ever had the opportunity to look at the naked body of another woman. Now, she

had seen Lina, (who was golden and covered with an invisible down that caught the light. But Lina at twenty-two was still unformed; her shoulders were rounded and each marked with a dimple; she was cast in one piece, with no figure, her waist as full as her hips. Her breasts were generous, but when she lay down, they seemed to sprawl on her with all their weight.

Hesitatingly, as though she might be caught at it, Dominique grasped her small, firm, pointed breasts, which had remained exactly the same as when she was sixteen. Her skin was finer than that of the finest fruit, with, in certain hollows, gleams of ivory, and in other places the fleeting blue tinges of the veins. In three months she would be forty; she would be old; already people must speak of her as an old maid, and yet she knew in herself that she had the body of a child, that she was young and fresh from head to foot and to the very depths of her heart.

For a second she clasped her breasts like the flesh of a stranger, turning her eyes away from the thin, white face that had appeared to her. It was thinner than of old, which made the nose seem even longer and a little askew. A fraction of an inch that had perhaps altered her whole character, had made her timid, sensitive and morose!

They put the record on again. In a few moments there would be sounds of coming and going, and the man would sing. He nearly always sang afterwards. Then he would open the bathroom door noisily, and his voice would come from further away. Everything was audible. Dominique had not wanted to take in a couple. Albert Caille was alone when he arrived, a thin young man with burning eyes, with such sincerity in his face and at the

same time such a hunger for life, that it was impossible to refuse him anything.

He had cheated. He had not admitted to her that he was engaged and would be getting married shortly. When he announced it, he had put on that suppliant look whose effects he knew so well.

"You'll see . . . It will be exactly the same . . . We shall live like bachelors, my wife and I . . . We will have our meals at a restaurant . . ."

Dominique was embarrassed at her nakedness, and she pulled up her shoulder-straps; her head disappeared for an instant in the dress; she pulled it down over her hips, making sure, before she sat down again, that nothing was out of place in the room, that everything was tidy.

A motor-car horn which she recognised. She had no need to lean out and look. She knew it was Madame Rouet's little open car. She had seen her leave after lunch, about two o'clock. She was wearing a white costume with a scarf of almond-green organdie, a hat to match and shoes and bag of the same green. Antoinette Rouet would never leave home in an outfit with a single jarring detail.

And why? For whom? Where had she been, alone at the wheel of her car, which would now be left standing for hours at the kerb?

Half-past three. She was late. Old Madame Rouet must be furious. Dominique could see her. She had only to raise her eyes. On the other side of the street they did not get the afternoon sun, and they did not close the shutters. Today, because of the heat, all the windows were open and everything could be seen. It felt like being with the people in their room—stretch out a hand and they could be touched.

They did not know anyone was behind Dominique's shutters. On the same floor as hers, Hubert Rouet was asleep, or, to be exact, he had been tossing uneasily for some minutes now in his warm, damp bedclothes.

He had been left alone, as he was every afternoon. The flat was huge. It took up the whole floor. The bedroom was the last on the left. It was rich. Rouet's parents were very rich: some people said they were worth more than a hundred millions,¹ but they lived like ordinary middle-class folk; there was no one to be extravagant but their daughter-in-law Antoinette, now returning in a white costume at the wheel of her car.

Dominique knew all about them. She had never heard the sound of their voices, which did not carry across the channel of the street. But she saw their comings and goings from morning till night, she followed their gestures, the movements of their lips. It was a long story without words, of which she knew the smallest episodes.

When Hubert Rouet had got married, his father and mother had been living on the same floor, the second, and at that time Dominique's father was still alive. He was lying helpless in the next-door bedroom, the one she had since let. Even then Dominique scarcely ever used to leave the house. Her father had a little bell within hand's reach, and he used to fly into a rage if his daughter did not come running to him at the very first tinkle.

"Where were you? What were you doing? I might die, in this house, without . . ."

Albert Caille was splashing about in the bathroom. Luckily she had put an old piece of linoleum there: other-

wise the floor would long since have rotted. He could be heard moving about, sluicing water.

Old Madame Rouet was sitting at her window. She was immediately over her son's head, for, when he had married, his parents had given the flat up to him and had moved up one floor. The block belonged to them, and a good part of the street too.

Sometimes his mother, who had bad legs, would listen. She could be seen listening, wondering whether her son were not calling. Sometimes she grasped a bell-push communicating with the kitchen on the floor below. Dominique could not see this kitchen, which gave on to the rear of the block, but she could count the seconds, and she was sure soon to see the young couple's maid entering the old lady's room. She guessed:

"Is your master asleep? Has your mistress not come home? Go and see whether my son needs anything . . ."

For a month past, rather more than a month indeed, Hubert Rouet had been in bed. It must be serious, for the doctor came to see him every morning, a few minutes after nine, at the beginning of his round. Dominique recognised the horn of his car too. She was present, after a fashion, at these calls. She knew the doctor, for he was Dr. Libaud, who lived in the Boulevard Haussmann and had attended her father. Their eyes had met once and Dr. Libaud had given a slight wave to Dominique across the street.

But for this illness, the Rouets would have been at Trouville, where they owned a villa. There was scarcely anybody in Paris. Taxis were rare. Many shops were shut, including Sutton's leather-goods shop, next to the dairy, where travel-goods were sold and where throughout the

rest of the year there were wicker-trunks on each side of the entrance.

Had old Madame Rouet heard her daughter-in-law's car? All of a sudden, Rouet had turned on his bed, his mouth open as if he were trying in vain to breathe.

"His attack . . ."

It was the time for it. There were at least two a day, sometimes three. Once, when he had had six, they had laid ice-bags on his chest throughout the day and for a good part of the night.

Unconsciously Dominique sketched the action of picking something up, the milky phial standing on the night-table in the sick man's room.

That was what he was waiting for. His eyes were open. He had never been fat, or in good condition. A drab little man, quite undistinguished, whom everybody thought ill-matched to his wife when they were married with great pomp at Saint-Philippe-du-Roule. What made him even more ordinary was a colourless toothbrush moustache.

Dominique could have sworn he was gazing at her, but it was impossible because of the almost closed shutters. She could see him, but he could not see her. He was looking into space, waiting, hoping. His fingers were clutching at the air; it looked as if he were going to sit up, yes, he was sitting up or rather he was trying, but could not manage it, and then suddenly both his hands went to his chest, and he remained there, bent double, unable to move, his face distorted with the fear of dying.

Dominique could almost have called out some message to Antoinette Rouet, who must be on the stairs, who was opening the door of the flat, taking off her hat and her green gloves:

"Hurry . . . The attack . . ."

And a voice close at hand, coarse by reason of its familiarity, said:

"Hand me my stockings . . ."

So that she could not prevent herself from seeing, naked and gorged, on the edge of the bed, a Lina still imbued with a strong male odour.

The sky was like slate. A line cut the street in two slantwise, but, whether on the shady or on the sunny side, one self-same substance, thick and viscous, filled the universe, until sounds were swallowed up and the noise of the buses reached the ears only as a far-off hum.

A door banged, the door of the bathroom, where Albert Caille had finished washing. He could be heard moving briskly to and fro, whistling the tango which the gramophone had been playing a few minutes before.

Antoinette was there. Dominique had started because she had just seen her by chance while looking, not at the sick man's windows, but at the next one, that of a sort of boudoir where, since her husband's illness, Antoinette Rouet had had a bed put up for herself.

She was standing close to the door between the two rooms. She had taken off her hat and gloves—Dominique had made no mistake—but why was she standing motionless as though waiting?

It was as if the old lady upstairs had been warned by her maternal instinct. She was worried, obviously. Perhaps she was going to make a heroic effort to rise, but it was months since she had walked unaided. She was enormous. She was a tower. Her legs were thick and rigid like columns. On the rare occasions when she went out, it took two people to hoist her into a car, and she always

seemed to be threatening them with her rubber-tipped walking-stick. Now that there was nothing more for her to see, old Augustine had left her window. She would certainly be in the long dim corridor on her floor on to which all the attic doors gave, on the watch for someone to pass whom she could speak to. She was capable of waiting thus for an hour at a time, her hands folded across her stomach, like a monstrous spider, and never once would the pasty face under the snow-white hair lose its expression of infinite gentleness.

Why did Antoinette Rouet not move? With all the strength of his gaze staring into the blazing emptiness outside, her husband was calling for help. Twice, three times, his mouth had shut, his jaws had clenched, but he had failed to gulp the mouthful of air he needed.

Then Dominique was as though transfixed. It seemed to her that nothing in the world could tear a movement or a sound from her. There had just come on her the certainty of drama, of drama so unexpected, so palpable, that it was as if she herself were taking part in it at that very moment.

Rouet was condemned to die! He was going to die! Those minutes, those seconds, while the Cailles next door were cheerfully getting dressed before going out for the evening, while a bus changed gear to get into the Boulevard Haussmann, while the shop-bell of the dairy tinkled—she had never been able to get used to the name of Audebal, pronouncing it with embarrassment like something incongruous—those minutes, those seconds, were the last of a man whose life she had watched for years.

She had never found him likeable. Or rather, she had. It was very complicated. It was not pleasant. She had at

first blamed him for letting himself be dominated by his wife, by that Antoinette, who had suddenly turned the household upside down with her vitality, with her exuberant vulgarity.

Antoinette could do anything she liked. He would follow her like a sheep, and he looked rather like one. Fortunately the old lady up above intervened!

She would ring.

"Ask Madame to come upstairs . . ."

And she would speak out, would the old lady, she would speak out in a tone very different from that of her sheep of a son. The daughter-in-law's cheeks would flush pink and red, and, back in her own flat, she would relieve her feelings with a gesture of fury.

"You're being brought to heel, my girl!"

Then, the sheep had not been entirely sheeplike in Dominique's eyes. He said nothing. He never protested. Antoinette might be out all day, she might return with her car full of expensive parcels, she might get herself up in outrageous clothes, but he would not protest. Yet Dominique realised that, like certain children who never take their own revenges, he had only to go upstairs to his mother's. And there he would tell it all, in a level voice, his head bent. He probably used restrained language. Perhaps he made a show of defending her?

"Ask Madame to come upstairs . . ."

Now, at this very moment, Antoinette was in the act of killing him! Dominique watched the scene. She took part in it. She knew. She knew everything. At one and the same time she was on the bed with the dying man and she was Antoinette . . .

. . . Antoinette who, still warm with the life of the

world outside, had opened the door of the flat, had suddenly felt her shoulders weighed down with the chill of the house, the silence, the familiar smells—the Rouets' flat must smell stale, with the musty odour of drugs . . .

The kitchen door had half-opened:

"Ah! Madame is back . . . I was just going to see if the master . . ."

And the servant had glanced at the alarm-clock. That meant that Antoinette was late, that it was the time when the attack was due, the time for the medicine which had to be measured out drop by drop. Fifteen, Dominique knew: she had counted them time and again.

Antoinette had taken off her hat in front of the mirror, which had reflected back to her the image of a young and elegant woman, brimming over with life, and at the same moment she had heard a slight sound, her wretched husband shrivelled up in his bed, his hands clasped over a heart threatening to stop . . .

The old lady up above, that implacable tower of a mother-in-law, had rung.

"Shall I go up, madame?"

Dominique saw the maid appear.

"Has my daughter-in-law come home?"

"She has just come in, madame."

"My son has not had his attack?"

"Madame is with him."

She ought to have been! She had been, nearly. A few feet to go. And, perhaps because of that image reflected back to her by the mirror and following her like her own shadow, perhaps because of the maid's question, because of her mother-in-law's little bell, look! she stopped.

Drops of sweat pearly on Dominique's brow. She wanted

to cry out, but she could not. Did she really want to? She lived through a fearful minute and still she experienced an unhealthy kind of pleasure. It seemed to her in a muddled sort of way that this thing taking place under her eyes was avenging her. Of what? She had no idea. She did not think. She remained there, tense, as tense as the other woman who had laid a hand on the doorpost and was still waiting.

If the servant came down again at once, Antoinette Rouet would be obliged to go into the bedroom, to go through the routine movements, to count the drops, to pour out half a glass of water, to mix the dose, to hold up the head of the man with the colourless moustache.

But old Madame Rouet was speaking! The cushion behind her back was too high or too low. It was adjusted. The maid disappeared in the shadows of the room. She was going to go downstairs. No. She was bringing the old lady an illustrated paper.

Rouet was on the point of death, and yet, look, he was sitting up! God knows whence he had drawn such strength! Perhaps he had heard a slight noise on the other side of the door, for he was looking towards it. His mouth opened. Dominique could have sworn that his eyes were flooding with tears. He braced himself and remained thus, immobile. He was dead, it was impossible that he should not be dead, yet he did not fall back all at once, but only with a slow sagging of the muscles.

His mother, just overhead, had guessed nothing. She was busy showing the servant a page in her magazine. Who knows? A recipe?

The Cailles crossed the drawing-room. They would

shut the door with a slam as usual. One day they would fetch it off its hinges. The whole house shook with it.

On the other side of the street an utterly calm Antoinette raised her head slowly, gave her brown hair a little shake and moved a step forward. At that moment Dominique noticed a semi-circle of sweat under Antoinette's arm, and she smelt her own sweat all the more: both women's clothes were clinging to their skins.

You would have thought that the woman had not looked at the bed, that she knew, that she needed no confirmation. On the other hand, she did notice the white phial on the night table, picked it up and looked about her with a sudden disquiet.

The mantelpiece, opposite the bed, was in chocolate-coloured marble. In the middle there was a bronze representing a recumbent woman leaning on one elbow, and on each side of the bronze there were two pots holding green plants with finely toothed leaves, plants which Dominique had not seen anywhere else.

There was a step over Antoinette's head. The maid was about to come downstairs again. The medicine was uncorked. The drops were slow in falling. Antoinette shook the bottle, and the liquid fell on the greenish earth in one of the pots and was at once soaked up.

It was all over. Dominique would have liked to sit down, but she wanted to see everything. She was dumbfounded by the simplicity of what had occurred, by the natural way in which the woman on the other side of the street poured a last drop of medicine into the glass, another drop of water, and then went towards the door.

She could be felt, almost heard, calling:

"Cécile . . . Cécile . . ."

No one. She started walking. She disappeared. When she came back, the servant was with her. She had found a handkerchief on the way and she was biting at it, wiping her eyes with it.

"Go up and tell my mother-in-law."

Was it possible that her legs were not trembling like Dominique's? While Cécile rushed upstairs, she stood away from the bed, looking elsewhere. Her eyes wandered through the window, and seemed to be caught for an instant by the shutters behind which Dominique was on the watch.

Had their eyes met? It was impossible to be sure. It was a question which was often to torment Dominique. Her head was swimming. She would gladly have seen nothing more, gladly have closed tight the shutters: but she could not. The thought suddenly struck her that a few minutes before she had been gazing at her naked breasts in the mirror, and she was ashamed, she was seized with remorse. It seemed to her that that action, at that moment, became more especially shameful. The thought came too, God knows why, that Antoinette was ten years younger than herself, that she was not even thirty. Yet Dominique, who would soon be forty, often felt herself to be a little girl!

Never had she been able to convince herself that she was a grown-up, as her father and mother had been when she was little, and here was a woman much younger than herself in action under her eyes. Here, while her mother-in-law, walking with the help of Cécile and a chamber-maid, was coming in, was Antoinette behaving with a disarming simplicity, crying, wiping her eyes,

explaining, pointing to the glass, asserting no doubt that the attack had been stronger than usual, that the drug had not worked.

The sky above the house remained the same threatening colour of overheated slate; people came and went on the pavement like ants in the narrow trench their column has cut in the dust; engines turned over; buses panted; thousands, tens of thousands, of people were frolicking in the blue water of the seaside; thousands of women were embroidering or knitting under yellow and red striped tents pitched on the warm sand.

Someone was telephoning, opposite. Monsieur Rouet, the father, was not there. He never was there. It was as though he had a horror of his house, where he was to be seen only at meal-times. He went out and came back with the punctuality of a man who is obliged to get to his office on time, and yet it was years since he had sold his business.

Certainly Dr. Libaud was not at home. Dominique knew. She had sometimes telephoned to him for her father at the same hour.

The women were at a loss. They seemed to be afraid, faced with this man, for all that he was quite dead; and Dominique was scarcely surprised to see Cécile come through the front door, go into the dairy and emerge with Monsieur Audebal, who, in his white apron, followed her indoors.

Dominique was at the end of her tether. Her head was swimming. It was a long time since she had had her scanty midday meal, and yet her stomach was in revolt and she felt she was going to be sick, but hesitated for a moment to cross the drawing-room for fear of meeting one of the

Cailles half-naked, and then in the end she remembered that they had gone out.

II

It had been about six o'clock the evening before when Dominique had gone to post the letter, a very long way off in the Grenelle district. Now it was not quite five o'clock in the morning, and she was up. How long had she slept? Barely three hours. She was not sleepy. She did not feel tired. For years past she had scarcely slept at all; it had begun when she was looking after her father, who used to wake her every half-hour.

Sometimes, alone in the one room she really lived in, she would move her lips, would almost pronounce words:

"One day, I must make someone understand . . ."

No! She would write it. Not in a letter, for she did not write to anybody now. There were so many thoughts she would record in an exercise book, and there would be a big surprise for whoever found it after her death. Among others, this: people who do not sleep, or who scarcely sleep, are beings apart, much more apart than people imagine, for they live every event at least twice over.

Twice! As she thought of this figure, she gave her silent, suppressed little laugh, the laugh of one who lives alone. It was ten, fifty, a hundred times perhaps, that she had lived over this event!

And yet she was not excited. Old Augustine could observe her from her attic, if she wished. She would see the Dominique of every day, with a handkerchief tied

round her head, a dressing-gown of faded blue caught round her skinny waist.

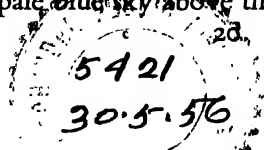
It would not be long. In ten minutes at the most, Augustine's windows would be seen opening. She had nothing to do at five in the morning, but she did not sleep either.

All the shutters were closed, the street was empty and the tarmac, seen from above, appeared so polished by the flood which broke over it during the day that it was gleaming, with violet reflections. In the glimpse of the cross-roads where the Boulevard Haussmann and the Avenue Friedland began could be seen part of the mass of a tree. It was less than half of a tree's greenery, and yet it was truly majestic, despite the height of the surrounding buildings: living branches, a world of foliage of a sombre green where all at once, a few seconds before the sun appeared in the sky, there would break out an unsuspected life, a concert in which thousands of birds seemed to take part.

The window was wide open. Dominique never opened it until after she had made her bed, for she felt ashamed of an unmade bed, of the crudity of crumpled bedclothes and dented pillow, even if they were to be seen only by the one person who could have caught a glimpse of them at that hour, old Augustine.

The gas was lit in the narrow kitchen which opened out of the bedroom, and Dominique did her tidying and dusting mechanically, with the same movements as every other morning.

It was rather, at that time of day, as if her universe had been extended. The whole street took part in it—the patch of pale blue sky above the roofs opposite, the tree



at the Hausmann crossing. The bedroom grew vaster, like a room in the country giving straight on to a garden. Another half-hour, and the first bells of Saint-Philippe-du-Roule would be ringing. Occasionally a car would pass, and when one stopped two hundred yards away Dominique knew that it was in front of the door of the Hospital Beaujon—a sick or dying person being brought in, perhaps an accident case. She heard the trains, too, very far off in the Batignolles direction.

And her father, over the bed, her father in full general's uniform, was watching her. The portrait was so made that the eyes followed her into every corner of the room. It was company. It did not stir her, nor did it make her sad. Had she not loved her father?

From the age of fifteen she had lived with no one but him, following him to each of his garrisons. During his years of sickness, in this apartment in the Faubourg Saint Honoré, she had looked after him day and night like a hospital nurse, like a sister of charity, and yet there had never been any intimacy between them.

"I am the daughter of General Salès . . ."

Involuntarily she would pronounce Salès in a special fashion, like a word apart, a precious, glamorous word. People did not always know the name, but the title of general was enough, especially when dealing with tradespeople.

Do men suspect that the beginning of the day is as full of mystery as the twilight, that it holds in suspension the same fragment of eternity? You do not burst out into vulgar laughter in the fresh coolness of dawn, any more than at the moment when you are brushed by the first breath of night. You are more solemn, with the

intangible boding pain of the creature confronted by the universe, because the street is no longer the commonplace, reassuring street, but a portion of the great whole containing the orbit of the star that plumes the sharp angles of the roofs with gold.

They were asleep next door. When she went near to the brown door, in which the key was on her side, she could catch the confused sound of their breathing; they were gorging themselves with sleep, just as they had gorged themselves with life all day long. The noises of the street would not wake them, in spite of their wide-open window; the clatter of the buses and taxis would blend naturally into their dreams, would sharpen their pleasure by giving them knowledge of their blessed state; and later, much later, at ten o'clock perhaps, slight noises, the movement of an arm, the squeaking of a spring, would be the prelude to the daily explosion of their vitality.

Funny that she should have got into the way of needing them! And still more since the thing, still more since the letter.

It had been six o'clock when she set out to look for a distant post-office, the hour of crowded café terraces, of straw hats, of glasses of beer on the little tables—there were even men in shirt-sleeves, with collars unbuttoned, as in the country.

She had gone on foot because she had to contain her fever by movement, walking quickly, with a somewhat jerky stride, and several times she had run into passers-by.

She wondered now how she had been able to go through to the end. Perhaps it was largely because of the word of power?

For three days now the shutters opposite had not opened, for three days she had been living face to face with those masked features, as it were.

She knew, for she had been to see. She had not been able to stand it any longer. Besides, anybody had the right to go in and out. She had waited till the last minute, the previous afternoon at four o'clock precisely, after the men from Borniol's had come to nail down the coffin and had gone away again.

She had put on her black costume. The concierge had given her an indifferent glance from the depths of her lodge, and she must have recognised Dominique as someone from the neighbourhood. On the second floor the front door was ajar; there was a salver in the brightly lit entrance; a man in black whom she did not know was sorting the visiting cards collected on the silver salver.

Was she, as she grew old, going to become like her Aunt Elise?

She took pleasure in breathing the odour, a pleasure that was almost sensual, and yet it was an odour of death, of candles, of too many flowers in shut rooms, with a musty hint of tears.

She did not see Antoinette. There was whispering behind the left-hand door, that of the big drawing-room. The bedroom door was open, and this room had been transformed beyond recognition into a mortuary chapel ablaze with candles. Five or six people were creeping silently round the coffin, shaking hands with old Madame Rouet who was seated near a potted palm.

The gentlemen in black cheviot and too-white linen were no doubt relatives from the provinces. They must be relatives on the Rouet side, like the girl scarcely out

of boarding-school who was looking after the old lady.

Dominique had perhaps made a mistake. No. She was sure she had not. In old Madame Rouet's attitude, in all her massive bulk, there was something hard and menacing. She was no longer the same person. It was impossible to laugh at her and her huge legs, her rubber-tipped walking-stick and her air of governing everything.

She had not allowed herself to be crushed under the weight of grief. On the contrary. She had grown still larger, more statuesque, and her inner sorrow supplied her with all the more strength even as it nourished her hate.

Her hate for the whole world perhaps, for everything that was not her son, including these nephews, who were here like groomsmen at a marriage and who in her eyes committed a crime by being alive. In any case, her hatred for her who was unseen, who was somewhere behind a door and who no longer had anything in common with the family.

Dominique had felt the shock of that maternal gaze and had been troubled, as though the woman had been capable of guessing her secret. For Madame Rouet looked at everyone coldly, sternly, seeming to say:

"Where does this woman come from? And that man, what does he want?"

Yet she remained there, massive, rooted in her arm-chair, without telling the rosary that had been put into her hand, without moving her lips.

It was almost shamefacedly that Dominique left the lying-in-state, and in the hall she bumped against the forewoman of a well-known house who was taking away

a cardboard box. There was whispering behind a door; a fitting was going on.

Dominique had not been able to see Antoinette. She knew nothing of her doings, except that she had spent the two nights in the apartment of her parents-in-law. She had caught a glimpse of the hem of her dress when she was shutting a window.

She had, on the other hand, caught a glimpse of the two green, slender-leaved plants on the mantelpiece, draped, like the rest of the room, with black.

But for this glimpse, which lasted a quarter of a second, who knows whether she would have written? At home, scarcely undressed, she hunted high and low for an old work on botany, illustrated with copper plates, which she had long ago noted among the general's books.

The Cailles were out. She had once seen them dining in a cheap restaurant down the street, not far from the Madeleine, as cheerful in the midst of the crowd as in the solitude of their bedroom.

Kentia Belmoreana . . . Cocos Wedelliana . . .

The book smelt of old paper, the pages were yellowed, the print very small, but in the end she found the picture she was looking for. She was certain that the two plants opposite were *Phoenix Robelini*.

Then she took a sheet of paper from the drawer and wrote out those two words once, five times, ten times. After which she took another sheet and wrote them out afresh in print script.

"The Phoenix Robelini on the right."

Nothing else. Was it not terrible enough? So terrible that she felt the sweat springing anew under her arms and losing itself in the material of her vest.

The print script made her feel ashamed when she had written the address on the envelope. It was shabby, almost ignoble. It smelt of the anonymous letter, and she made do with sloping her handwriting backwards, for she had read somewhere that all back-sloped handwritings looked alike.

Madame Antoinette Rouet
187 bis, rue du Faubourg-Saint Honoré,
Paris (VIIIe)

Now, alone in her bedroom, she no longer understood how she could have done it. She had had time for reflection. She had hurried far away, crossed the Seine, traversed the whole of the École Militaire district. There was a holiday feeling in the streets. Numbers of taxis on the way to the Gare Montparnasse were carrying beach gear or fishing tackle. She saw a canoe on the roof of a passing car. Those who remained in Paris must be thinking:

“Since everybody’s going away, we’re fully entitled to take it easy . . . !”

In the orange light there was a strange blend of calm and effervescence, a sort of truce to serious cares and day-to-day preoccupations; and Dominique went on walking, following unknown pavements and discovering provincial streets, where families sat on their doorsteps and half-naked children played in the carriageway. She stopped finally, stopped short and sharp in front of a post-office where she got rid of her letter, and then remained for another minute, trembling at what she had done, yet in a way relieved.

It was as though the Cailles had done it on purpose that

evening. For seven years, since her father's death, she had lived alone in the flat and never once had she been frightened, never had she conceived that one could be frightened of solitude. She had rejected the offer of a widowed cousin who lived at Hyères—she was the widow of a naval officer—and who had suggested going to live with her.

When she had sent the advertisement of the room to the newspaper . . .

How shameful to read, in print:

“Furnished room to let to single person in handsome apartment in Faubourg Saint Honoré. Low rent.”

It had seemed to her that from then on her fall was public, definite. Yet it had to be done. There was no other way out. General Salès had no fortune. The sole property of the family had been a share—one-third—in this block the general had settled in after his retirement.

Did Dominique blame him? Hardly. She could look at his portrait without anger, as without pity. For a great part of her life he had been for her merely a hairy man, always booed, with jingling spurs, a hard drinker who, when he entered the house, announced his presence with noisy shouts.

As a civilian, he had been nothing more than a querulous, mean, old man, who seemed to blame the passers-by for not suspecting that they were rubbing shoulders with a general.

He had begun to gamble on the stock market. Then, after losing all he possessed, he had gone to bed, having selfishly decided to be an invalid, and leaving to Dominique the care of looking after everything else.

Their share in the building had been sold. That

Dominique still occupied her flat was due to a cousin who, now sole owner of the building, allowed her the enjoyment of it. She had written to him, in her pointed hand "which gave the words a cruel look:

"... I know how much I am indebted to you already, but in my present situation I am driven to ask you to agree to my taking a tenant ..."

It was Caille who had come, because he was not well off and because, for the rent she was asking, he could have got only a tiny and comfortless room in an hotel.

"You will have to go through the drawing-room, but you will not meet me there often. All visitors are absolutely forbidden. You understand what I mean. Nor do I want any cooking done in the room ..."

She had given him to understand that a servant would see to the housework, but the second day he had caught her at it herself.

"I haven't found anybody yet; I hope that in a few days' time ..."

That was all one to *him*. She had not dared say anything to him when she had found a camembert box and a crust of bread behind the overmantel. He was poor. He would sometimes eat in his room, though she looked in vain there for a gas-ring. So he was not doing any cooking. He used to go out early in those days. He would come home late. He had two shirts and a single pair of shoes. She had read the letters he used to receive from his fiancée and did not bother to hide.

It had been a whole epoch for her. She could not have defined it, but it left behind it regrets, nostalgia.

"I will never allow a woman in the flat ... A man, all right ... But a woman ..."

She had accepted Lina, out

of fear of having to advertise again, of seeing a stranger in her home.

"On one condition . . . Your wife will do the room herself . . ."

Dominique was the one who regretted that now. She no longer had an excuse for going into the room at any hour. She did so still, but furtively, after having bolted the door on to the landing. He still had only two shirts, but in the wardrobe hung the dinner jacket he had bought second-hand for his wedding. Lina left the most intimate things lying about in full view.

In the evening Dominique had got into the habit of not going to bed till the couple had come in. What could they be up to so late? Long after theatre or cinema had closed, they must go wandering about the streets, or into the little bars that were still open, for they had no friends. She would recognise their footsteps in the street a long way off. In their own room, they would go on talking loudly. They did not hurry. Did they not get up when they pleased? The sound of their voices behind the door grew into a kind of company Dominique could not do without, so much so that when they were out more than usually late she would go and lean on the window-sill to watch for them.

"They might not shut the door properly . . ."

That was just an excuse. She did not want to take an interest in them. But that had not stopped her, the night before, from remaining at the window until two in the morning, watching the lights go out one after another and counting the passers-by, while all the time she had under her eyes the closed shutters of the Rouets' apartment, which she knew to be the empty setting of the

coffin in which the man with the colourless moustache had been finally enclosed.

She had reached the point of counting the hours that stood between her and the moment when he would be borne out at last, when the shutters would open and the rooms would come to life again.

The Cailles had come in. They talked! They were capable of talking like that from morning till night! What could they find to say to each other? She never talked to anybody, or at the most sometimes caught herself silently moving her lips!

The letter would arrive this morning, at a quarter past eight, carried by the little postman who walked askew, as though pulled over by the weight of his bag. The concierge would put it in the Rouets' pigeon-hole, with the hundreds of letters of sympathy, for they had sent out a large number of announcements.

Dominique had one. She had stolen it. The Rouets, who did not know she so much as existed, had not sent one to her. The evening before, as she went by the lodge, Dominique had gone in to make sure there was no post for her. She scarcely got two letters a month now, but already her idea had come to her. She had at once seen, in the pigeon-hole belonging to Madame Ricolleau—the wife of the former minister—who lived on the first floor, a large envelope with a black border.

She had taken it. The announcement was there on the worn tablecloth.

*“Madame Antoinette Rouet, née Lepron
Monsieur and Madame Rouet-Babart
Monsieur and Madame Babart-Basteau . . .”*

There was a lengthy column of them:

"... regret to announce the death of their husband, son, grandson, uncle, cousin, nephew, second cousin, which occurred suddenly today after a long illness . . ."

Dominique's lips had drawn back as though affected by a nervous tic.

And now the street was beginning to liven up; other noises were mingling with the song of the birds in the tree; it was no longer possible to hear the fountain that ran night and day in the courtyard of the old mansion nearby; a truck pulled up at the kerb just opposite, and some workmen began work after rousing the concierge, who was in a bad temper. They were undertaker's men, come to hang the front door with draperies surmounted by a silver "R."

Old Augustine, who could see nothing from her window because of the cornice, soon appeared on the pavement and so was out of doors much too early for her shopping, for at Audebal's the milk was only just being delivered and Sionneau's, the delicatessen, was not open yet.

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That day turned out like those events which children enjoy too long in anticipation, so much so that they cannot sleep on the last evening for thinking of them—events which, it seems, can never come about.

Right up to the last minute the time passed with maddening slowness, and it seemed to Dominique that things were not taking place as they ought to have done.

For example, the undertaker's men, having put up their hangings, went off for a drink at the wine-merchant's

three houses further down, came out wiping their mouths and departed leaving things in the lurch.

As for the people of the block, they left for work at their customary hour, as if nothing had happened. They passed between the draperies and only a few turned round to judge the effect. The dustbins took their places on the pavement. The shutters on the Rouet parents' floor did not open till eight o'clock. But as these windows were higher than Dominique's, she saw the occupants only when they happened to be very close to them.

At nine o'clock two taxis stopped some minutes apart: relatives, some of those Dominique had seen the evening before at the lying-in-state. Every quarter of an hour flowers were delivered by little girls or cheeky lads, who were not in the least impressed. Quantities of flowers, although most of the friends of the family were on holiday. They must have telegraphed to the florist.

Audebal's display had been set out as usual. Bégaud, the chemist's, was open, and it too was framed in black and silver, like an undertaker's.

Dominique, already dressed and her black thread gloves laid on the table, was the only one to be ready too soon, while the Cailles, after stirring on their bed for a moment, had gone back to sleep without even knowing there was a funeral across the way.

"There'll be a lot of people . . ."

Various cousins were coming furtively to leave their cards, the ones who had no time to attend the ceremony or who assumed that their presence would be unwanted.

At a quarter to ten Dominique saw the forewoman of the dress-house getting out of a taxi. She was bringing the dress!

The body was to be moved at half-past ten! Antoinette, upstairs, must be waiting in her slip . . .

Suddenly, the street was crowded, though it was impossible to tell how. There were groups stationed on the pavements. Ten, fifteen, taxis arrived nose to tail, so that people had to wait for the one in front to leave before they could get out in their turn.

A motor-hearse turned up at last. An agitated movement seized all the black silhouettes and, when Dominique, judging that the moment for going downstairs had come, arrived in the street, the coffin was making its appearance in the corridor of the block, veils could be half seen in the semi-darkness and bare-headed men were being directed to their places by the master of ceremonies.

No one suspected the presence of a slight feminine silhouette nervously worming its way to the front, that of a woman who would have given everything to catch the eye of the widow. Dominique knocked against one and another, stammered "sorry," raised herself on tiptoe. But she saw nothing but black garments, a veil, a rather common woman in deep mourning supporting her daughter, for Antoinette's mother had come.

Old Madame Rouct, on the other hand, did not appear.

Her husband walked behind his daughter-in-law at the same pace as when he set off each morning, God knows where, and—the only one of the family to do so—he looked at the people one after another, as though counting them.

What had taken so long to prepare passed off too quickly. Dominique found herself surrounded by other women, took her place in a queue, mounted the steps of Saint-Philippe-du-Roule without seeing anything and

took her place in the north transept, a long way from Antoinette, whom she could see only from behind.

Perhaps she had not yet opened the letter, lost among so many letters of sympathy? Unconsciously, with a sort of voluptuous pleasure, Dominique breathed in the sound of the organ, the scent of the incense which brought back her childhood and those first morning masses during her years of religious enthusiasm.

As a girl, as a child, had she not got up before the others to go to mass, and had she not known that smell of the streets at daybreak?

If Antoinette were to turn round . . . Soon, when the procession was back in the forecourt of the church, she would pass very close to Dominique, she would almost brush past her and perhaps Dominique would get a view of her eyes through her veil?

There was something childish in this curiosity, something rather shameful. So, formerly, when there had been talk in front of her about a girl who had had relations with a man, Dominique had afterwards sought her eyes, as though she were going to find exceptional stigmata there.

One day, when they were in garrison at Poitiers, her father's orderly had been convicted of theft. And Dominique had observed him in the same fashion. When she was smaller still, she had walked round and round a lieutenant who had gone up in an aeroplane.

Everything that was life made its impress on her, Lina her tenant, too, and often she would spend hours wrestling with herself, because of that door which separated them, that keyhole through which she could look.

"Tomorrow, I will do it . . ."

She used to forbid herself. She was sickened. She felt

nauseated in advance at what she was to see. Afterwards it made her really ill, as though the inmost secrets of her own flesh had been violated, but the temptation was not to be resisted.

Antoinette Rotet—she had been so hungry for life as to remain unmoving in a doorway while her husband died. She had let the seconds run out one by one, without stirring, without a movement, her hand on the doorpost, well knowing that each of those seconds was a second of agony for the man in the bed she herself had slept in.

Afterwards she had not so much as looked at him. She had thought of the medicine. Her gaze had strayed about the room, had settled on one of the green plants.

"Phoenix Robelini."

And the plant had remained there in the death chamber. It was still there among the draperies which the undertaker's men must be busy taking down. She would see it when she got home. Would she dare do away with it?

Would she go on living in the Rouets' house? Would they keep with them, close to them, a daughter-in-law who was no longer anything to them and whom old Madame Rouet detested?

At this thought, Dominique was panic-stricken. Her hand clenched on the pew in front of her. She was afraid that she might be robbed of Antoinette, and all she felt now was haste to get back to the Faubourg Saint Honoré, to reassure herself that the shutters were open as usual and that life would go on in the apartment.

Had it not been a bad omen seeing Antoinette at her mother's side, as if she were already changing families once more? Why had she not been at the lying-in-state the evening before?

“Because old Madame Rouet did not wish it!”

Dominique was sure of that. She did not know what had happened or what would happen, but the evening before she had seen the old lady, as massive and hard as a caryatid, and she had sensed that a new feeling had entered into her being. . . .

Some relatives, distant relatives in the furthest reaches of the family, turned round to inspect the congregation, and the liturgy rolled out its monotonous splendours. Dominique mechanically followed the coming and goings of the officiating priests, her lips from time to time accompanied their prayers with a murmur.

She filed up for the offertory. Old Monsieur Rouet, bolt upright, looked at the faithful as they passed one by one, but Antoinette had knelt down and was keeping her face between her hands.

She was behaving like an ordinary widow, a black-edged handkerchief crumpled into a ball in her hand; and when at last she passed close by Dominique, the latter, seeing only eyes a little more brilliant than usual, a skin more matt—perhaps because of the lighting and the veil—was disappointed. Then immediately afterwards something struck her. She wondered for a moment what, her nostrils quivered and then in the air heavy with incense she identified the delicate scent which Antoinette Rouet trailed in her wake.

Had she really used perfume?

When Dominique reached the forecourt, amidst the monotonous crunching of soles on the flag-stones, when she encountered a dazzling triangle of sunlight, the first cars were moving off to give way to those that followed, and she slipped into the crowd and got away somehow

from the burial, hastening her pace the nearer she got to home, on the shady pavement of the Faubourg Saint Honoré.

The Rouets' shutters were open. The Cailles had only just got up and the water was running into the tub in the bathroom. The gramophone was playing and a faint smell of gas and breakfast coffee was hanging about. Dominique, on opening the window, welcomed with relief the sight of the windows opposite, out of which Cécile and another servant, plying duster and broom, were driving columns of luminous dust.

III

It was violence that burst out where Dominique, her impatience turning to exasperation, had expected to see fear or perhaps remorse. And that violence ran white-hot so freely, like a force of nature, that for quite a time Dominique ceased to understand what was happening.

It was the fifth day after the funeral and nothing had happened yet. The weather was the same, the sun as fierce, with this difference that from now on towards three o'clock the sky became leaden, the air grew even heavier and unhealthy exhalations bore right down on the Audebal's dog lying across the pavement. People's eyes turned automatically upwards in hope, the hope of seeing this lowering sky break at last, but, though indistinct rumblings sometimes seemed to be audible far away, the

storm did not break, or went off to break far away from Paris.

Her nerves taut, Dominique had done nothing during these five days but wait; and in the end she could no longer have told which would relieve her more—the unloosing of the elements or the event for which she was watching for hours at a time, which she could not foresee, yet which could not fail to bring itself about.

It was inconceivable that across the way Antoinette should be living thus as though in suspense, as though in an overnight hotel, as though in a railway station. By way of convincing herself, Dominique would say to herself over and over again:

“She hasn’t read the note. Or else she hasn’t understood it. Perhaps she doesn’t know the name of the green plant . . .”

Antoinette was once more sleeping in the big double bed, the one which had been her husband’s sick-bed, the one in which he had died. She went out very little. When she did go out, she wore her mourning, but at home she had not given up the luxurious *négligées* she was so fond of, with their richly trimmed heavy silks.

She would get up late, taking her breakfast in bed, idly. She would exchange a few words with Cécile and it was clear that the two women did not get on with one another, Cécile appeared stiff and reserved, and Antoinette bore her presence with obvious impatience.

She would lounge about the apartment, tidying drawers, making piles of the dead man’s clothes, calling the servant to carry them off to some distant cupboard.

She would read. She read a great deal, a thing she used never to do before, and it was rare for her to be seen with-

out a cigarette in the end of a long ivory holder. What a lot of time she was able to spend seated on a divan and polishing her nails, or again, in front of a little mirror, solemnly plucking her eyebrows!

Not so much as a glance at the windows opposite. She ignored Dominique, she ignored the street, coming and going as though she attached no importance to it in this provisional universe.

It was not until the fifth day, about nine o'clock in the morning, that the suitcase incident occurred—or rather the two suitcase incidents, for, by an odd coincidence, a suitcase played a part in Dominique's flat too.

Dominique had shortly before gone down to do her shopping. There had been a trivial incident. At Audebal's three or four women were standing in a group by the white marble counter. The proprietress had served her first, not as a favour, but because certain regular customers were in the habit of stopping for a moment to gossip while unimportant shoppers were swiftly disposed of.

"What can I do for you, lady?"

"Two ounces of Roquefort."

Dominique's voice was flat and cutting. She was not going to be ashamed of admitting her poverty, and she deliberately looked the old wives straight in the eyes.

Madame Audebal weighed the cheese. The women were silent.

"There's just a little bit over . . . One franc fifty . . ."

It was too much. She could afford only one franc's worth of cheese. Her expenditure was meticulously calculated, and she had the courage to say:

"Would you kindly weigh me exactly two ounces."

Nobody said a word. Nobody laughed. Nevertheless

there passed through the clean, white shop a thrill of ferocious pleasure at the tiny morsel of Roquefort which the proprietress carefully set about dissecting from an already small piece.

When she passed under the archway of the building where she lived, Dominique was surprised to see Albert Caille, who had come downstairs in his pyjamas to make sure that there was no post for him. He seemed astonished and put out, and went on determinedly looking, rummaging in all the tenants' pigeon-holes.

She went upstairs. She peeled a few vegetables, and a little later she heard a lengthy whispering in the Cailles' room. Lina got up, and dealt with her dressing much more quickly than usual. The couple were ready in less than ten minutes, and it was then that the first suitcase came into the story. Dominique recognised the sound of two metallic clicks, that of the fastenings of a travelling bag.

She took fright at the thought that her tenants were going to leave her, and she stood close to the drawing-room door. She half opened it, and soon afterwards saw them going out. Albert Caille was carrying his suitcase.

She did not dare keep them back or question them, but contented herself with shooting the bolt behind them. She went into their untidy bedroom, then to the bathroom, where she saw the toothbrushes, the unwiped razor, bits of washing hanging up. She saw the dinner jacket in the cupboard. Then, because old Augustine was at her window up there, she felt embarrassed and went back to her own quarters.

Why had they taken the suitcase away? The evening before they had not gone out for dinner as usual and yet

she had not seen them come in laden with little parcels, as people do when they want to eat something at home.

Old Madame Rouet was at her post, in her tower as Dominique used to say—that is, seated by the window just over the room where her son had died. It was a tall window which rose from the floor, like all the windows in the building, so that she could be seen from head to foot, always in the same armchair, her stick within hand's reach. From time to time she would ring, would call one of the servants, give orders to some invisible person, or else, facing the dim interior of the room, would supervise some job she had just given instructions for.

Several minutes elapsed before Dominique saw Antoinette, who must have been in the bathroom. Then suddenly she perceived her, in a pale green dressing robe, her hair slightly dishevelled, helping Cécile to drag a rather heavy trunk into the middle of the room.

Dominique's heart thumped.

"She's going away . . ."

So that was why Antoinette had remained so calm! She had been waiting for the formalities to be over. The day before a sombre-looking man, who must be the family lawyer, had come. Monsieur Rouet had not gone out as usual. Antoinette had gone upstairs to her parents-in-law, no doubt for a sort of family council, for a settlement of the situation.

Now she was going away, and Dominique's impatience was becoming exasperation, turning into rage. A thousand thoughts assailed her and yet she could not have said why she was refusing to allow the departure of Antoinette Rouet, why she had determined to oppose it by every means.

She even thought of going to see her! But no. She had only to write.

"I forbid you to leave the house. If you do, I tell all."

Undergarments and clothing piled up in the trunk and they went to another room for suitcases and cardboard hatboxes.

Antoinette was cool. Cécile was more rigid, more disapproving than ever; and at one moment, while her mistress was arranging some jewels in a little casket, the servant disappeared.

Dominique guessed what it was about, and was pleased with herself for having guessed right. She had only to look up. The time to climb one flight of stairs, to knock. Madame Rouet turned her head and said:

"Come in!"

She listened, frowned, raised herself from her armchair, using her stick for support.

Dominique was triumphant. She was in the know now! And she looked at Antoinette with a smile like a sardonic grin.

"Oh, so you think you're going to get away as easily as that. . . ."

She was expecting what happened, and yet the actual sight was so striking that it gave her a shock.

She saw Antoinette quickly turn her head. At the same time she saw old Madame Rouet framed in the doorway. She had come downstairs and was standing there, massive and unmoving, leaning on her stick. The old lady did not speak. She just looked. Her gaze moved from trunk to suitcase, to the unmade bed, to her daughter-in-law's green dressing-gown, to the jewel casket.

It was Antoinette who was disconcerted. It was she who, jumping up like a schoolgirl caught breaking the rules, launched into a flood of speech. But, even as she began to speak, one cutting word silenced her.

What had she been trying to explain? That she had no reason for staying on in Paris in mid-August, in such heat? That the family had always spent the summer in the country or by the sea? That her mourning would be no less mourning somewhere else than in a dreary and stuffy apartment?

But what she was faced with, what her hunger for space and movement beat against, was a cold, unchangeable force. It was centuries of tradition, a reality on which the realities of life could gain no hold.

At one moment the tip of the walking-stick was raised. It touched the skirt of the green silk dressing-gown and the gesture sufficed. It was more than a condemnation, it was the expression of utter contempt, a contempt which the old lady's features would not condescend to register, leaving the task to her stick.

Old Madame Rouet disappeared. Left alone, Antoinette looked at herself in the mirror for a long time, her fists clenched against her temples, then suddenly she strode to the door and called:

"Cécile! . . . Cécile! . . ."

The maid emerged from the invisible back of the apartment. Words flowed and flowed, while the servant, impassive as her old mistress upstairs, stood rigidly upright, refraining from lowering her eyes.

She was a scraggy girl, very dark-skinned, with no style, who wore her hair scraped to the back of her head, where it formed a hard bun. Her complexion was sallow,

especially about the neck. Her chest was flat, and while she listened patiently, she kept her hands folded across her stomach. Those folded hands proclaimed her self-confidence as well as her contempt for all the wrath that broke about her without touching her.

. Dominique could not hear the words. Without realising, she moved so close to the window that, if Antoinette had turned her way, she would have known that she had long been under observation and would perhaps have learnt much more at the same time.

Her brown hair, which was flowing and abundant, floated about her head, and its silken mass swung from one shoulder to the other. Her dressing-gown was half open, her half-naked arms gesticulated, her eyes came incessantly back to those hands folded in effrontery across a stomach.

In the end, Antoinette could stand it no longer. It was a real explosion. She hurled herself on Cécile. She hurled herself on those hands and tore them roughly apart. When the servant still did not budge, she gripped her by the shoulders, shook her, banged her head several times against the doorpost.

Just then the servant looked out of the window for a second or so, unconsciously no doubt, or perhaps because a puff of air lifted a fold of the curtain. Her eyes met Dominique's, and Dominique was sure she had caught the shadow of a smile.

Of a terribly satisfied smile!

"You see! Now you know what she's really like, this woman who made her way into our house, who made out she was living with Monsieur Hubert and who now . . ."

That suppressed smile, was it not rather directed at Antoinette?

"Hit away! Throw yourself about! Show yourself for the slut you are! Look more and more like what you really are, a fishwife off the streets, like your mother, who sold shellfish in the market . . . You're being watched! . . . You don't know it, but you're being watched and you're being judged . . ."

Antoinette let go. She took only three or four steps across the room, still talking passionately. When she turned round, she was dumbfounded at finding the maid still in the same place and she threw herself on her again, with more force than the first time. She pushed her into the boudoir next door, hustling her along, almost pulling her off her feet, until at length she reached the door on the landing.

She threw her out. Perhaps she shot the bolt. And when she appeared again, she was almost calm. The outburst had relieved her and she was still talking to herself, walking up and down the apartment, seeking an idea, for she still had an overmastering need to act.

Was it the sight of the still unmade bed, with the breakfast tray still on the coverlet?

She went to the telephone and dialled a number.

In her tower old Madame Rouet had turned towards the interior of the room. Cécile was there, no doubt of it. The old lady was not getting up again. She was listening. She was speaking calmly.

At the telephone Antoinette was being emphatic. Yes, it must be at once. Dominique did not know what Antoinette had decided on, but she understood that it had to happen *immediately*.

There were moments when Dominique forgot to breathe, so much did this vitality throw her off her balance. She had been less impressed by the crime itself—for it was undoubtedly a crime that had been committed under her eyes. At least it had taken place silently, without movement. It had merely been the climax of a secret, suffocated, life where now life overflowed, turbulent and encroaching, with the fearful rawness of life itself.

Dominique no longer knew what to do with herself. She did not want to sit down. She did not want to miss anything of what was taking place, yet it hurt her, made her giddy. It was as painful, only more so, as when she had looked through the keyhole—like the first time, for instance, that she had seen the sexual act in all its brutality, and had witnessed the thrust of a man's body quivering with animal strength.

So this was Antoinette? Dominique's whole being revolted before this splendid, vulgar, craving for life.

She wanted to write, at once. The words that kept coming to her were as crude as the spectacle she was witnessing.

"You killed your husband."

Yes, that was what she would write, write immediately. And that was what she wrote without thinking, without taking care this time to disguise her handwriting.

Instinctively she added:

"You know you did!"

And those words betrayed Dominique's inmost torment, the true reason for her indignation. She could have understood remorse. She could have understood anguish slowly distilled by the hours as they passed. She could

have understood everything, made allowances for everything, pardoned everything perhaps, except for this lack of feeling, this five-days' wait and the subsequent brisk departure—for, if Antoinette had not been stopped, she would have left, naturally and cheerfully! Finally she could not pardon the rebellion which revealed Antoinette's lack of awareness.

"You know you did!"

No doubt, but Antoinette did not seem to realise the fact. She might know it, but she did not feel it. She was a widow. She was at last freed from a dull and boring husband. She was rich.

She was leaving, and why not?

Dominique nearly went downstairs at once to post her letter, but a truck drew up across the way and two men got out, laden with tools, two workmen in blue overalls.

Antoinette received them at the front door of the apartment, in which Cécile had not reappeared.

She was calm. Her movements were precise. She had made up her mind. She knew what she wanted, and her decision would be carried out forthwith.

The first thing to do was to dismantle the huge bourgeois bed and remove it. The upholsterer's men took off the mattress, and placed it in the doorway. Then they unscrewed the bedposts. At once the room appeared naked, with nothing but a square of fine dust to mark the place where Hubert Rouet had died.

Antoinette kept giving orders, bustling about without a thought for her half-open dressing-gown, and followed by the two men who obeyed, unconcerned, carrying into the bedroom the divan on which she had slept while her husband was ill.

She glanced at the sombre curtains which were hardly ever drawn, and nearly said:

"Take them away!"

No doubt the thought struck her that the windows could not be left uncurtained, and that there were no other curtains handy.

The two pots, with their green plants, were still on the mantelpiece, and one gesture settled their fate. Dominique could not believe her eyes when she saw Antoinette let them go without a look or a tremor, without a thought of all that had happened.

The Cailles were still out. It was eleven o'clock and the street was almost deserted. The chemist had lowered his faded yellow awning, and the closed shutters of some shops suggested a Sunday morning.

As early as half-past eleven the upholsterer's men had finished their work, had moved the furniture round and had stacked the superfluous pieces in a room giving on to the courtyard, the dim light from which Dominique glimpsed for one instant at the end of a long perspective of doors.

Then, left alone and contemplating the spectacle around her, Antoinette seemed to say with a certain satisfaction:

"Since they want me to stay! . . ."

She was organising herself, emptying the trunks and the suitcases, lighting a cigarette from time to time, shrugging her shoulders after a glance at the ceiling, above which she could feel the overwhelming presence of her mother-in-law.

Did she suspect that events were going to rush to a climax and make that day a turning-point? In any event, she was at her ease in activity, welcoming it with relief.

She did not bother to dress or go out to lunch, and Dominique saw her come out of the kitchen with a piece of cold meat on a slice of bread.

Old Monsieur Rouet came home. Dominique saw him only in the street. His wife disappeared from the window, and it was easy to imagine the two of them in the half-darkness of their apartment. She was giving him the news and they were considering the steps to be taken.

And indeed, a little later Antoinette jumped as she heard the ringing of the front-door bell. By the second ring, she was on her way to open the door. Her father-in-law entered, cold and calm—less cold, however, than his wife, as if he had come to rub off the sharp corners.

He must have been instructed up above:

“Be firm! Above all, be firm! Don’t let yourself be worked on by her tears and her shamming. . . .”

Perhaps to give a more solemn tone to his visit to the flat which had formerly been almost common to the two households, he had brought his hat; and, as he sat, he balanced it on his knees, shifting it each time he crossed or uncrossed his legs.

“My dear, I have come . . .”

That was how he must be speaking.

“ . . . after the painful time we have just lived through . . . obviously . . . you must understand that . . . obviously it is necessary . . . if it were not for other people . . . ”

It was a fresh source of stupefaction for Dominique to see Antoinette perfectly calm, almost smiling, an Antoinette who said yes to everything, with more of irony perhaps than conviction.

But of course! She would do without a holiday, since her parents-in-law made such a point of it! She had merely

taken the liberty of making the apartment more habitable for a single person. Was that a crime? Was she not entitled to arrange to her liking the place where she was condemned to live? Well, that was all. Perhaps after a time she would change the hangings. They needed changing and were far too mournful for a young woman. She had said nothing hitherto, since it was her husband's taste, or rather the taste of her parents-in-law . . .

Come! Even Monsieur Rouet was delighted to find her so amenable. But he had still one demand to put before her. He hesitated, shifting his hat two or three times, biting off the end of a cigar which he left unlit.

"You know that Cécile is one of the family, so to speak, that she has been with us for fifteen years . . ."

A man never notices such things. He is rarely able to perceive hate in a woman, because it does not show itself in the same way as with him. Merely a raising of the bosom, a scarcely visible start, a transient tensing of the features, then a condescending smile.

Well! It was agreed . . . Cécile might come back. . . . She would continue to spy on Antoinette, to go upstairs ten times a day to her mother-in-law's for orders and to recount to her everything that took place downstairs. . . .

And then? . . . Anything else? . . .

Come, come! No excuses! Quite natural! Just a little misunderstanding. Everyone's on edge in this stormy weather. . . .

She escorted her father-in-law to the door. He wrung her hand, delighted that the interview had passed off so well, and hurried up the stairs, two at a time, to go and tell his wife that he had been victorious all along the line, that he had displayed firmness and inflexibility!

And look! there was Cécile going downstairs again already, faultless in her black frock and white apron, her voice as sharp as her features:

"What would Madame wish me to bring her?"

Ah! yes? She had eaten. Thank you. She did not need anything. Just a telephone call, because the emptiness, after all these comings and goings, was all the less endurable today, like the draughts on a spring-cleaning day.

A telephone call full of familiarity and affection. That was obvious from her face and the way she smiled. She was talking to someone she trusted, for the smile, momentarily, was full of menace towards a third party.

"That's agreed, then. Come . . ."

While waiting, she stretched out on the divan, her eyes on the ceiling, her long cigarette-holder between her lips.

The Cailles had still not come in.

Dominique's letter was on the table, close to the little parcel in which the Roquefort had become soft and sticky.

Would she send it or not?

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She was not a shell-fish seller. It was true that her father had been a fish-salesman at Dieppe, but she—Antoinette's mother—had married a man who worked on the underground. So she had never lived behind a fishmonger's slab, still less in the market.

She was tall and stout, and her voice must be deeper than the average woman's. She had taken care to trim her half-mourning with a white band round the base of her hat. The way she paid off the taxi, after inspecting the

meter, was enough to reveal a person with no need of a man to guide her through life.

She was not alone. A young woman who could not be more than twenty-two was with her. She was not in mourning, and she had not been present at the funeral. There was no need to look twice at her to realise that she was Antoinette's younger sister.

She was wearing a very smart costume and a model hat by a celebrated house. She was beautiful. That was the first thing about her that struck you. Much more beautiful than Antoinette, with something more reserved about her that disturbed Dominique, something, moreover, that Dominique did not understand. She could not say whether this was a girl or a woman. The large eyes were a dusky blue and very calm; her deportment was more reserved than her sister's. Her upper lip had an upward curve, and that perhaps was what contributed most to her air of youth and candour.

Antoinette had not needed to dress for her. They kissed, and with a look Antoinette announced:

"The old lady's up above!"

She let herself fall into an easy chair, motioning to her sister to take the divan. But her sister contented herself with a chair, maintaining her attitude of a young lady paying a call.

Her costume was perhaps too trim and correct, like her entire outfit, which made one think of a woman after all.

"Tell . . ."

That was what her mother must be saying, as she examined the walls and the furniture around her, and the way Antoinette shrugged her shoulders was commoner than when she was by herself. She was speaking. It was

clear that her voice was commoner too, with a slight drawl, and that she must be using words that were not particularly well-bred—especially when she referred to the old lady in the tower and her eyes automatically sought the ceiling.

During the whole of Antoinette's married life Dominique had never seen the sister in the house, and she could easily have counted the times she had seen the mother. She understood why. It was easy to understand.

Since their arrival the apartment had rapidly changed, and was now pervaded by an indescribable atmosphere of carelessness and disorder. Antoinette's mother had dumped her hat on the bed. Soon perhaps, overwhelmed by the heat, she would stretch herself out on it, while the sister alone maintained the attitude of a well-bred caller.

Antoinette was still telling her story—miming her mother-in-law's arrival, her apparition rather, in the frame formed by the doorway, the comings and goings of her creature Cécile. She mimed the wheedlings of her father-in-law, his false dignity. She made fun of it all, trying to force a laugh, and her final gesture concluded:

"So much the worse for them!"

It was quite unimportant, mind you. She would manage. She was managing. She had plenty of time. Come what might, she would get her own way in the end, in the teeth of all the Rouets in creation.

Had old Madame Rouet, up above, heard the sound of raised voices? Anyway, she rang, and began to question Cécile as soon as she came to see what was wanted.

"It's Madame's relatives, her mother and her sister . . ."

"No! Not that! The mother, all right, but the sister who . . . the sister whom . . ."

"Please ask Madame to come up and see me."

Antoinette was hardly surprised at the request.

"What was I telling you? Wait a second . . ."

Was she going to go upstairs in her dressing-gown, in the too-green dressing-gown at which the walking-stick had so recently pointed such angry scorn? What good would that do?

She took down a black dress, the first that came to hand, and planted herself in front of the mirror. There she stood in her slip, before her mother and sister, arranging her hair and sticking in the hairpins she took from between her teeth.

"Does that look all right?"

Let's get going! She climbed the stairs. Though Dominique could not see her, it was as if she was following her with her eyes. Madame Rouet's once beautiful profile was eloquent. No rage. A few words which broke from her like ice from a window.

"I thought it was understood, once and for all, that you would not have your sister here. . . ."

Down below, Antoinette's sister knew what was going on, for she was already on her feet and tidying herself in front of the mirror in her turn, waiting only for Antoinette's return to take her leave.

It was done.

"And that's that! She laid down the law all right! All I've got to do now is to show you the door, my poor girl. The old cow says so."

She burst out laughing, and her laughter across the street hurt Dominique. She kissed her mother, called her back, went to a little bureau and took out several bank-notes.

‘Look! At least take this . . .’

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Antoinette was asleep on the divan, one foot hanging almost to the ground; and on her face there was no trace of the least emotion or anxiety. With lips half parted, she was sleeping in the afternoon heat, with all the life of the street humming around her.

The Cailles had not come in, and Dominique had once again visited their room, after bolting the front door.

She knew now that they had not gone away. In the wardrobe she had failed to find Lina's coat, a fine winter coat in beige cloth, trimmed with marten, which she had brought with her from home—a brand-new coat such as a well-off bourgeoisie from the province would own.

Dominique had gone out and, right up to the last minute she had put off making a decision. It was very furtively that she had posted her letter in a box in the Rue Royale. A motor coach crowded with foreigners had brushed close by her and it seemed to her that these transient visitors, dazzled by the unknown city, were escaping from the common stream of life.

Her breast had been pinched with envy. She had never had anything to spare over and above the monotonous and disheartening daily round—apart from a few short years, long ago, before her eighteenth birthday: but she had not realised it then, and so had not been able to relish it.

Only that morning she had had to insist on the rotund Madame Audebal, her *bête noire*, paring off a scrap of cheese, because the piece already weighed out was too big and too dear. Everything was too dear for her!

The Cailles had gone out to sell Lina's coat, or else they had pawned it: but they lived as though they had no need to count their money.

They lived! Just then she met them walking arm-in-arm. She sensed that the suitcase knocking against the man's side was empty. She sensed especially, from his greedy lips and the sparkle in his eyes, that he was rich, that he had money in his pocket, that now he was going to live still more abundantly. And Lina followed him without a thought of where he was leading her.

Dominique would have preferred to slip by unnoticed, but Lina had seen her and had nipped her companion's arm as she murmured something. What was it?

"The landlady . . ."

Yes, that was what she was to them! Unless she had said:

"The old hag!"

Did she think one felt old at forty?

And here was Caille greeting her with an ample sweep of his hat—her so humble and slight, who hugged the wall, as if to take up less room in the street.

And these thousands of people hurrying to and fro, drinking, slumped happily on the café terraces, greeting one another, looking at the women's legs and their too thin frocks clinging to their rumps—all this smell of human bodies, of human life, seizing her by the throat, mounting to her head.

How terribly, terribly she longed that day to burst into tears!

IV

She walked quickly, as if she were being followed. Or rather, the nearer she got to the house, the more precipitate and jerky became her gait. She displayed the feverish activity of a swimmer who suddenly realises how rash he has been and swims frantically towards the shore where he will be within his depth at last.

That was exactly it. She was already beginning to get back into her depth in the porch, where she was welcomed by the hollow echo peculiar to this former town-house converted into flats. Her feet met once more the rough grain of the yellowish, ill-fitting flagstones. She saw her reflection, tiny and misshapen, in the brass knob on the staircase, and her hand slid with physical contentment along the polished banister rail. Higher up, invariably on the same step, she would pause a moment to hunt in her bag for her key; and each time she would suffer a little pang, for she never found the key at once, and, half-seriously, she would wonder whether she had not lost it.

She was home at last. Not yet fully at home in the drawing-room, but only in the bedroom, the one room to which she had confined herself and which she would sometimes wish smaller still, the better to charge it with herself.

She locked her door and halted, tired and out of breath, at the spot where she always halted, in front of the mirror, seeking in it her own reflection by way of welcome.

She felt for herself, for Dominique, for her who had once been called Nique—but who, except herself, would have called her that now?—she felt for Nique an overwhelming pity, and it did her good to look at her in this mirror which had followed the Salès family to all the garrison towns and which had known her as a child.

No, she was not yet an old maid. Her face remained unwrinkled. Her skin remained fresh, although she lived cooped up indoors. She had never had much colour, but the skin she saw was of a rare fineness, and Dominique would recall the voice of her mother saying, with such delicate inflexions:

“Nique has the skin texture of the Le Bretons. As for the way she carries her head, she gets that from her grandmother de Chaillou.”

It was a comfort, on coming in from the rough tumult of the street where people shamelessly displayed their vitality, to be back with her household gods as it were, with certain names that were not mere names, but the enduring landmarks of a world she formed part of and revered.

The syllables of those names had a hue, a scent, a mystic significance. Nearly every one of them was represented by some object in this room in which Dominique was now regaining her self-possession, with the taste of the nameless street-dust still in her mouth.

Thus, there was neither alarm nor clock in the room, but a tiny gold watch at the bedhead; and this watch, in its case decorated with a flower in pearls and ruby-dust, was the watch of her grandmother de Chaillou. It evoked a vast country house in the neighbourhood of Rennes which everybody used to call the chateau.

"The year when the chateau had to be sold . . ."

Serving as a casket for the watch, there was a slipper in red silk embroïded in green, blue and yellow, and it was Nique who had embroidered it, when she was seven or eight years old, and was a boarder with the Sisters of the Ascension at Nîmes.

She lit the gas and laid a napkin at the end of the table by way of a cloth. They must be having dinner in most of the apartments in the street—those at least whose occupants were not away on holiday—but no one was to be seen in Antoinette Rouet's room.

To get away from this obsession with Antoinette, to whom her thoughts kept incessantly returning, Dominique wanted to play her game, to play at thinking, as she had formerly called it, and indeed still did call it, half wittingly, half unwittingly.

It called for a particular disposition of spirit. One must put oneself in a state of grace. In the morning, for instance, when she was occupied with the housework, it was impossible. It was impossible too to begin at a set moment. It was like a waking dream, and dreams do not come to order. At the most one can only put oneself progressively into a favourable state.

The word *de Chaillou* was a good word to start from, a key-word, but there were others, for example *Aunt Clémentine* . . . Aunt Clémentine—that would be in the morning, towards eleven o'clock when the coolness was giving way to the more oppressive noonday sun and when one began to be aware of the smell of one's own skin. . . .

A villa, at La Seyne, near Toulon. . . . Aunt Clémentine's husband—she was a Le Bret who had married a

Chabiron—was an engineer at the arsenal at Toulon. . . . Dominique was spending a month's holiday with them; she was reading, in a garden blooming with mimosa. As the sun beat fiercely down she could hear the panting of the engines at the naval dockyards. She had only to get up to see, through a tangle of gantries and travelling cranes, a patch of sea of an intense blue. And it was all so still, formed a whole so close-knit, that it was a relief at midday to hear the rending shriek of the factory sirens answered by the sirens of the vessels at anchor and followed by the tramping feet of the workmen as they went over the level crossing.

Aunt Clémentine was still alive. Her husband had died long since. She was still living in her villa, alone with an old servant. And Dominique, in spirit, set each thing in its place, right down to the russet cat which could no longer be alive; she reconstructed each corner. . . .

Suddenly, because she used to play this game while watching over her sick father, she was in a tremble, thinking she heard the famous sigh coming from the bed. She was disconcerted not to see the old general in his place, with his hairy face and that look which always expressed an icy reproach.

"Well? Where's my pipe?"

He smoked in bed, he had given up shaving and he hardly ever washed his face. It was as though he was dirty on purpose, deliberately growing into a repulsive object, and he would sometimes say with diabolic satisfaction:

"I'm beginning to stink! Admit that I stink! Go on! Admit it. It's true! I stink, my God, I do!"

Her father's room—now it was the Cailles who were

entering it. She no longer needed to play at thinking, to look for subjects for her dreaming. Antoinette and the old Rouets were across the way; just by her, separated from her by a single door, were the young people now returning with their empty suitcase.

What were they doing? What was this bustle? She was not used to it. It was not their time of day. They had scarcely had time for dinner. Why were they not off to the cinema, or the theatre, or one of those dance-halls whose tunes she used to hear them humming next morning?

A bucket was being filled. The tap was wide open. They were quite capable of forgetting it and letting the water spread over the floor. She was always afraid, with them, of some such disaster, for they had no respect for things. For them, a thing, no matter what, was something that got replaced. It cost so much, and that was all. Whereas she would fret over a spot on a mat or a curtain! They were talking, but they were making too much noise moving things about for her to be able to catch the words. Augustine was at her window. She had taken up her post. For her it was a real post of duty. Her supper was barely finished before she was leaning her elbows with all her weight on the attic windowsill. She had on a black blouse with a tiny white pattern, and the violet shadows of evening brought out the whiteness of her hair. There she was, placidly dominating the streets and roofs. It was not until much later that one window or another filled with people coming for a breath of fresh air now that their day was done.

Dominique had played the game with old Augustine too on days of depression, when the mirror returned an

image full of fatigue, with black-ringed eyes and colourless lips—on days when she felt old.

What had old Augustine been like at the beginning? What had she been like at forty? What used she to do then?

The story of Augustine invariably ended with her funeral, which Dominique would visualise down to its smallest detail.

“What is it?”

No. She had not spoken those words. It was within her that the question had framed itself. There had been a knock on the door. And she looked about her with anguish, wondering who could be knocking at her door. Such was her surprise that she had not thought of the Cailles. There was a pause long enough for someone to walk up and down once or twice, and then there was another knock. She turned the key soundlessly—she did not want it thought that she lived behind locked doors. She glanced in the mirror to make sure there was nothing untidy about her appearance.

She put on a tense smile: one must smile when people call.

That was another relic of her mother, who had had a smile of an infinite melancholy.

“It costs so little and it makes life so much pleasanter! If everybody would only make a little effort.”

It was Albert Caille. He appeared embarrassed. He too was doing his best to smile.

“I beg your pardon for disturbing you . . .”

She thought: “He’s come to tell me they’re leaving the flat . . .”

And he, despite his good upbringing, peered into the

mysterious recesses of this room where she lived. What was it that astonished him? That she should confine herself to a single room when there were others she could have used? That it should contain nothing but ill-assorted and out-of-date furniture and ornaments?

"We have had a letter from my parents-in-law. They arrive from Fontenay-le-Comte at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning . . ."

She could not get over his blushing, he who was always so much at his ease in life. She noticed that his features were assuming a childish expression, that of a child who wants something, who is afraid he will be refused, and pleads with a pout and a look.

He was so young! Never had she seen him so young! He still had some innocence left behind all his smart ways.

"I don't know how to explain . . . If we are not yet settled in our own flat, it is because my job may change from one day to the next . . . You understand . . . My parents-in-law are accustomed to their comfortable provincial life . . . It's their first visit to us since our marriage . . ."

She had not thought to ask him to come in. She did so now, but he remained near the door. She guessed that Lina was waiting, listening.

"I'm so anxious that their first impressions should be favourable . . . They will only be stopping a day or two: my father-in-law can't leave his business for long . . . If, during that time, you were to let us use the drawing-room as though it were ours . . . I'm quite prepared to settle with you by a supplement on the rent . . ."

She was grateful to him for having hesitated before

pronouncing such a coarse word as "pay," for having substituted "settle."

"We should be out all day in any case . . . My parents-in-law will be staying at a hotel . . ."

He thought she was hesitating, while she was thinking:

"Does he take me for an old maid? Do I look old to him? Am I in his eyes a woman, a woman like . . . a woman to whom . . ."

She visualised over again the spectacle she had several times watched through the keyhole and she was troubled. She was ashamed of herself. Not for anything in the world would she permit a man, whoever he might be . . . But to know that a man, that Caille, for instance, might have such an idea . . .

"My wife would also like . . ."

He said "my wife." Which meant that still unfinished creature, with her shape not yet set, that bran-stuffed doll, so to speak, who laughed at everything and because of everything, showing teeth which might have been milk-teeth. .

"My wife would also like, just for these two days, to make one or two little changes in the room . . . Don't be alarmed . . . We'll put everything back . . . We'll be very careful . . ." .

Would he venture, for example, to come close to her, to put forward his hands as he surely did with other women, for he had the innate urge to explore anything that was woman's flesh?

He smiled. His look was suppliant, disarming.

"What do you want to alter in the room?" she heard herself saying.

"If . . . if it would not trouble you too much, I would

take down the woodwork of the bed . . . Oh, I'm used to that sort of thing . . . If we put the mattress on the floor we should get a divan and we have brought a cretonne for it . . . you understand? . . ."

Just like across the street! Wasn't it extraordinary? That morning, Antoinette Rouet had done exactly the same thing! Thus, in her and in the young couple, an identical taste evinced itself, and Dominique thought she understood. They no longer thought of the bed as a means of rest, they were making something else of it, something more sensual, adapting it to other ends and activities.

"You will let us? Do say you will."

She realised that her blouse was again wet under the arms, and the feeling of damp warmth made her eyes sting. Very quickly, she said:

"Yes . . . go ahead . . ."

Then, on second thoughts, she added: "But mind you don't damage anything!"

They would laugh at her, because of that warning. They would say:

"The old girl's afraid for her bits of sticks and her old-fashioned curtains . . ."

"Thank you very much . . . My wife will be so glad . . ."

He withdrew. In the drawing-room Dominique saw flowers—a whole armful of fragrant flowers which had been laid on the marble top of a table until they could be arranged in the various vases.

"Above all, don't put any in the blue vase: it's cracked and the water would leak . . ."

He smiled. He was satisfied. He was in a hurry to be close to Lina.

"Don't worry . . ."

All that evening they led a life of noise. There was the sound of buckets being filled, of washing and rubbing and furniture being polished. Twice Dominique saw Albert Caille busy doing the housework in his shirt-sleeves.

' She had shut the door tight to get some slight feeling of being in her own home. She leaned out of the window, lightly, nonchalantly, as though just for a moment, and not with the static force of old Augustine, who was clearly determined to remain at her post for hours. The street was quiet and almost empty. A very thin old gentleman, dressed all in black, was exercising a small dog and stopping patiently each time the dog stopped. The Audebals were sitting in front of their shop door. It was obvious that they had been on the go all day long, that they had been hot, and that they had only a few minutes to relax, for the husband would be at the market at four in the morning. Their servant, the one who carried the milk and whose hair was always falling into her eyes, was sitting by them, her arms dangling, her eyes empty. She was probably not more than fifteen, yet she had the big breasts of a grown woman, like Lina, perhaps larger. Who knows if already . . .

Of course! With her boss! Audebal was the sort of man who made a most unpleasant impression on Dominique. He was so sturdy, so full of hot blood, that one seemed to feel it beating in his arteries with great strokes, and his eyes had the arrogance of an animal in high condition.

Occasionally, from the Boulevard Haussmann, voices were heard. It was a group walking in the road and talk-

ing loudly, as though for the benefit of the entire universe, regardless of the people leaning out of their windows or taking a little turn in the cool.

The light was brassy and there were brassy glints on the houses. A brick chimney stack looked as though it were bleeding. On the shadowed side colours assumed a terrifying depth. The least animate objects seemed to be alive with a life of their own. It was as if, with the day finished and the turmoil hushed, at this hour when men were putting a damper on their existence, things were beginning to breathe and to live their own mysterious lives.

The windows of Antoinette's bedroom had just been shut. Dominique had caught a glimpse of Cécile's black dress and white apron. For one second she had seen the bed in all its intimacy, its coverlet already turned down. Then the curtains were drawn; they filtered a faint pink glow, the glow from a lamp with a pink shade which had been placed on an occasional table a few minutes before.

Was Antoinette, like a prisoner, going to bed already? Right over her head, old Madame Rouet was at her post, with her husband beside her. Of him Dominique could see only a patent-leather slipper, patterned socks and the bottoms of his trouser legs, for he had one foot on the support bar of the window.

They were talking without heat or hurry. At one moment the old lady would speak and Dominique saw her lips moving. The next she would fall silent and, turning towards the interior of the room, listen to what her husband had to say to her.

Dominique was impatient for it all to be over, for the

people to disappear one after another—first the Audebals, dragging the legs of their chairs over the pavement and letting loose a metallic din as they fixed the iron bars on their shutters; then the pale woman she did not know, who lived on Dominique's left, on the third floor of Suttons' the leather goods people. She had a child. Dominique had often met her with a child of five or six: it was very well cared for and its mother felt impelled to stoop over it constantly. But the child must be ill at present, for it had not been seen out of doors for at least a fortnight, and the doctor went into the house every morning.

Yes, let it all disappear! She would even prefer to see the shutters hermetically closed as in winter, for at this time of year there were people who slept with their windows wide open, so that it seemed possible to feel the breath of the sleeping beings exhaling from the houses. The illusion was so strong that, for an instant, it seemed to Dominique that some sleeper had just turned over on his damp bed.

The birds in the tree, that portion of tree which she could glimpse at the top end of the street, at the cross-roads where a policeman patrolled, not knowing what to do with his white truncheon—the birds had begun to live with the same ecstasy as in the morning, an ecstasy which would come to a sudden stop when the last reddish gleams had died away and the sky, now an icy green in the quarter opposed to the sunset, had gradually taken on the softness of night.

She was not sleepy. She seldom was. The Cailles' spring-cleaning irritated her, upsetting her world. She jumped at every noise, worrying and wondering what

they were doing to her house. She wondered too why Antoinette had gone to bed so early, how she could go to bed and sleep peacefully after the day she had just gone through, in the room where only a few days before her husband, bathed in a mortal sweat, had been appealing desperately for help with his whole being, with as much voice as a fish thrown down on the grass and gulping greedily at the death-dealing air.

The hours, the half-hours, sounded from Saint-Philippe-du-Roule. All the light of the day had melted away and tufts of light appeared about the angles of the roofs opposite—rays of a moon not yet visible but soon to emerge from behind those roofs and reminding Dominique of the great square at Nancy, when she had been little and when the first arc lamps shed the same frosty rays, so sharp that they pierced your pupils through.

There was no one left to go in now except fat Augustine. She went in and shut her window. She would be slumping down on the bed with all her weight. And, heavens! what sort of nightclothes would she do it in? She could be visualised enveloped in shapeless things, camisoles, drawers and flannelette petticoats charged with her own special smell.

Dominique had not put on the light. Under the door a strip of light came from the Cailles' quarters. They had left their window open, for it was possible to make out the lighter rectangle projected on the darkness of the street.

It was one o'clock when they put their light out. The pink light had gone out across the way too at Antoinette's. On the floor above the Rouets were in bed.

Dominique was alone. She gazed at the moon. Quite

round and of an unearthly fullness, it had at length just climbed a few inches above a chimney. Because the sky was too pale, forming a single luminous surface like a ground glass window, the stars could scarcely be distinguished, and some words came back to Dominique's memory:

"... killed by a bullet in the heart, 'at night, in the open desert ..."

Only a sky like this could give the idea of the desert. An equal solitude underfoot and overhead, and this moon sailing in a limitless universe.

"... at the head of a column of twenty riflemen ..."

She turned round. On the sewing-machine case, despite the darkness, she could make out the shape of a prayer-book, its binding protected by a black cloth cover. It was the missal that had been given to her for her first communion. One of the cards, in fine illuminated parchment, bore her name, with the initials in letters of gold.

Another pious picture in the missal was on a mourning card.

"*Madame Geneviève Améraud, née Auger, died, fortified by the rites of Holy Church, in her ...*"

Angoulême. Her father was only a colonel then. They were living in a huge square house, a very soft yellow in colour, with a wrought-iron balcony and almond-green shutters to the windows, which opened on to a boulevard with a track for riding. The barrack trumpets were heard punctually at five o'clock in the morning.

Madame Améraud was a widow who lived in the house next door. She was tiny and used to walk with very little steps, and the saying was:

"As gentle as Madame Améraud. . . ."

She smiled at everybody, but more readily at Nique when she was fifteen, sixteen years old. She used to invite her into the drawing-room where she would spend hours of monotony without seeming to guess that the girl's continual haunting of her house was on account of her son Jacques.

Yet he was only to be seen during the vacations, for he was a cadet at Saint Cyr. He wore his hair *en brosse*. He had a serious face. A serious voice too. It was astonishing, this bass voice in so young a lad with as yet only a soft down on his lip. But the seriousness was gentle.

"Nique . . ."

For three years exactly she had loved him, all to herself, without telling a soul—loved him with all her heart, living only in the thought of him.

Did he know? Did Madame Améraud know the reason for the child's being thus daily in her house?

One evening the general had been invited to call. Old brandy had been served, liqueurs and cinnamon biscuits. Jacques was wearing the uniform of a second lieutenant and he was to leave next day for Africa.

The lamp-shade was pink, like the one in Antoinette's bedroom. The window was open on the boulevard, where they could see the moon reflected from the pale trunks of the plane trees which glowed with its light. They had heard the last post sound at the barracks.

Dominique had been the last to go. Madame Améraud had discreetly withdrawn; the general was waiting on the pavement while he lit a cigar; and then, in a whirl, during the brief moment for which Jacques held her hand in his, Dominique had stammered out:

"I'll wait for you always . . . always . . ."

A sob mounted, she withdrew her hand and, to get away, took her father's arm.

That was all. Except for a postcard, the only one she had received from him, giving a view of a little post in baked mud on the edge of the desert, the black silhouette of a sentry, the moon and, near that pallid moon, one word followed by an exclamation mark:

"Ours!"

The same moon as had shone on them that evening at Angoulême, and as Jacques Améraud was to be killed under "*by a bullet in the heart*" in the desert.

Dominique leant her head forward a little through the window, so that her forehead might catch the cool breeze whispering past the house, but she recoiled with a blush. From the next window sounds reached her—a murmuring she knew well. So, they were not asleep! Their room set to rights, the flowers arranged in the vases, the light out, it was *that*, still *that*, which claimed them; and the most shocking thing perhaps was the abrupt laughter, stifled but all the more eloquent, of a woman being made happy.

Dominique longed to go to bed. She withdrew to the back of her room to undress and, though there was no light on, her body showed white in the shadows. She covered herself hastily, and made sure that the door was shut. As she slipped into her bed, she gave a last look at the window opposite and saw Antoinette leaning on the sill.

No doubt she had been unable to get to sleep. She had turned on the pink lamp again. Its light revealed the disorder of the divan converted into a bed for the night, the pillow on which a hollow hinted the mould of the head,

the embroidered sheets, an open book, a cigarette end smouldering in a cup.

The room seemed to be pervaded by a voluptuous atmosphere of softness, and Dominique hid behind one half of the window, in order to observe Antoinette outlined in the sharp clarity of the moonlight. Her brown hair, let loose, flowed over the milk-white shoulders. Her body, in a heavily embroidered silk nightgown, had a ripeness such as had never before been revealed to Dominique. One word sprang to her lips, one simple word, the word "*woman*"; and Dominique thought she understood it for the first time. Her arms resting on the bar of wrought iron, Antoinette was leaning forward, so that her bosom spread slightly over the whiteness of her arms; her breasts were gently pushed up; a shadowy hollow could be seen in the opening of the nightgown; her chin was rounded and it too rested, as it were, on a little roll of softest flesh.

A short while ago, when the two sisters were face to face, Dominique had judged Antoinette's sister to be the more beautiful.

Now, she understood. It was a being in full bloom that was there, in the setting of the cool of the night, on the frontier between a pink-lit room and the infinite.

It was a being in suspense, as it were, a being which had been made for something, which was yearning after that something with every fibre. Dominique was sure of this. She was quite taken aback by the pathetic look of the dark eyes staring at the sky. She could feel a sigh which, swelling breast and throat, was exhaled through the full lips before the teeth, in a sort of impatient spasm, could close on it.

The certainty came to her that she had been wrong, that she had behaved like a fool, not like a child even but like a fool, like the foolish old maid that she was; and she was overcome with shame.

Shame for the letter whose naïve riddle was like the riddles school children amuse themselves with:

“*The Phoenix Robelini on the right.*”

And, confronted with Antoinette’s tranquillity during the days following the despatch of the letter, she had been lost in conjecture, thinking that Antoinette had not received the note, that perhaps she did not recognise the name of the green plant!

What did it matter to Antoinette?

Dominique had thought only a short time before to deliver a decisive blow. Yes, there had been malice in her action! Or rather no, a dumb instinct for justice—envy, perhaps?—what did it matter? Only a short time before, like an old maid in a frenzy of excitement, she had scribbled another note thinking to be cruel, to plough furrows in the flesh with the point of her pen:

“*You know quite well that you killed him!*”

Was that what she had written? No!

“*You killed your husband. You know you did.*”

Did she know? It mattered so little! Nothing mattered except that living flesh which had fled from the pink-lit divan and was now, for all its immobility, its quiet appearance of a woman at her window, nothing but an irresistible urge towards the life it needed so much.

Dominique, standing barefoot, hiding like a criminal behind one wing of the window, blushed for herself—for having understood nothing, for having seen only the most obvious and sordid details of what had taken place

opposite, for having feasted on them, even today, as she spied on the entrances of a menacing mother-in-law, the diplomatic attitudes of an embarrassed father-in-law, Antoinette's glad relapse into vulgarity when with beings of her own kind, she banknotes she had furtively taken from a drawer and handed to her mother—everything, even to the pink light, the nightgown in too heavy silk, the cigarette smouldering away in the long ivory holder.

So fixed was her attention on another's life that she forgot to breathe herself. Her burning gaze continued riveted on the woman at her window, on those eyes lost in the sky. From them she drew a more vibrant life, a forbidden life. She felt the blood beating in her veins, a fit of giddiness taking possession of her, and suddenly she threw herself down on her bed, burying her face in the softness of the pillow to stifle the bitter cry of impotence tearing at her breast.

For a long time she remained thus, rigid, her teeth clenched on the linen made wet with her saliva, haunted by the feeling of a presence.

"She is there . . ."

She did not dare make a movement. She did not dare turn over. She waited vigilantly for the slightest noise which would put an end to her torment, which would bring the news of her delivery. It came, a long time later, long after the Cailles, flesh against flesh, had gone to sleep. It was the commonplace squeaking of a window-catch.

At last she could raise her head and turn half over. There was nothing left except a closed window, the dull opacity of the curtain linings, a passing taxi—and only then did she allow herself to sink into sleep.

V

What use would it be to invoke her familiar ghosts? They would only gather round her like saints one is not sure of, in whom one has already ceased to believe, yet of whom one furtively seeks pardon.

The air was liquid. Her things were in their places, with their colours, their solidity, their play of light, their comforting humbleness. They were within reach of Dominique's hand, for her aim had been to reduce her universe to the four walls of a room. Yet at that hour it was as if she also owned the visible world beyond the pale blue rectangle of the window, the great space of morning freshness in which the smallest sounds made an echo, for even old Augustine was not yet up.

Dominique was pale. Her features were drawn. Neither cold water nor soap had been able to dispel the traces of the bad hours she had passed in the camp-bed—the bed which just now, at a quarter past five, when the first steps echoed in the street, had already resumed its severe counterpane and its innocuous appearance of being something made ready for parade.

For years, throughout her life indeed, Dominique had made her bed as soon as she rose, in a hurry—she did not quite know why—to clear her surroundings of everything that could recall the life of the night. It was only this morning—she had risen with a dull pain in her head, an abnormal sensitivity of the temples—only this morning that this obsession had struck her. Her eyes had sought another ritual object, the wicker basket which contained

the stockings waiting to be darned and the big egg of varnished wood.

Instantly a softer, almost sugary atmosphere had lapped round her. She had felt the presence of her mother. With an effort she could perhaps have seen her face, elongated like those of the Virgin in pious pictures, the smile which radiated from her without being expressed by any particular feature, her hand which, as soon as the doorbell rang, would reach for the stocking basket in order to hide it in a cupboard.

"You don't let people see your stockings in holes."

No more did you let them see those shapeless things, all too evocative in their intimacy—stockings rolled into a ball. Never, during the day, would a half-open door have permitted a glimpse of the foot of a bed or the marble, livid as a nude, of a wash-basin.

Search her memory as she might, Dominique could not recall her mother in *négligée*, or in her slip, or even with her hair unbrushed.

One phrase kept coming back to her, and she realised now, at forty, that the influence of this phrase, seemingly so simple, had pervaded her entire life. Where had it been spoken? Dominique found it somewhat difficult to place herself once more in the various houses they had occupied, for everywhere she had lived in the same atmosphere. The Salès' houses resembled one another as do hotels of a certain class. They were big light houses—oddly enough almost every one had had a balcony—with trees close at hand, on a square or a boulevard, in localities inhabited by doctors and lawyers, and nearby the echo of barrack noises.

An uncle they did not very often see had called. There

was a little gathering in the drawing-room. Dominique was perhaps fourteen years old. She had not yet been sent to bed. The talk had turned to dogs and their instinct.

"It's solely by smell that they recognise people. I know a blind old lady who begins to sniff whenever anybody passes by, and immediately afterwards she gives the name. Never makes a mistake. . . ."

Madame Salès had given that constrained smile, made that imperceptible movement of the head, which were automatic with her when upset. Had she already guessed that Dominique would be asking her:

"Is it true, mama, that people have a smell?"

"No, dear. Uncle Charles doesn't know what he's talking about. It's only people who don't wash who smell. . . ."

What use would such a mother's gentle and melancholy shade be to Dominique, when peeping at the closed windows behind which Antoinette Rouet was drugging herself with sleep?

All Dominique's ghosts were of the same kind, as were all the sayings which she found in the depths of her memory.

"The Cottrens have gone to take a cure at La Bourboule. . . ."

One did not specify the name of the disease; one did not evoke the ailing flesh.

"Little Madame Ralet has just had a baby. . . ."

The expression "give birth" did not come in to sharpen the picture. Everything always occurred in a world of half-tones, the beings in which never appeared otherwise than washed, brushed, and smiling or melancholy.

Even the very proper names were fetish-like. They

were not uttered like ordinary words, like the names of folk in the street. They had their peculiar noble quality. There were half a score of them, not more, with admittance into this vocabulary, which was the meeting-place of the family at Brest, the family at Toulon, the lieutenant-colonel and the naval engineer and the Babarits, who had made an alliance with the Lepreaus and thus entered the sacred circle by right of second-cousinage with the Le Brets.

Yet these people, it occurred to Dominique today, had not been rich. Most of them had only a little property.

"When Aurélie inherits from her aunt de Chaillou . . ."

Now the Rouets, with their load of millions, would never have been allowed access to the magic circle. Nothing rough or common was allowed to enter, nothing coarse, nothing smelling of everyday life.

Indeed, only ten days previously Dominique had been watching the lives of the people opposite with a contemptuous curiosity. She had been interested in them because their windows were under her eyes from morning till night, in the same way as she was interested in old Augustine, or the lady with the sick little boy or even—though, God knows, a gulf separated them—the unspeakable Audebals.

But they had been nothing to her, there was no mystery about them. Common people who had made a fortune out of manufacturing wire—old Monsieur Rouet had founded one of the most important copper wire drawing works in the country—and who led such life as they were fit to lead.

That an Antoinette should have entered their household—that was commonplace: a bachelor of forty, feeble

in constitution and character, who let himself be seduced by a typist because she was a pretty girl and knew what she wanted.

That was the simple, harsh light in which Dominique had been observing them for years. .

"*She* has gone out again in the car . . . *She* has got a new outfit . . . *Her* new hat is extravagant . . ."

Or else:

"*He* daren't say anything to her . . . *He* is overawed by his wife . . . *He* lets himself be led by the nose . . . *He* is not happy . . ."

Sometimes she would see them in the evening, alone together in the boudoir, and it was clear that they had no idea what to do or what to say to each other. Hubert Rouet would take up a book, and Antoinette would take one up in her turn, but she would quickly throw it aside or gaze over the top of the pages.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"What would you like to do?"

Didn't he understand that she didn't want to do anything, that she couldn't do anything, *with him*?

"Are you bored?"

"No . . ."

Then, most often, she would tidy her frocks and her odds and ends, or else she would lean her elbows on the window-sill and gaze out like a prisoner, waiting for bed-time.

Yet, only ten days ago, Dominique would simply have summed the situation up, as her mother would have done, with the gentle smile of those who are above such temptations:

"One can't be happy if one marries outside one's own set."

The Rouets' set was quite uninteresting. The set which Antoinette came from did not, so to speak, exist.

"No, no, dear. It's only people who don't wash who have a smell."

And yet, when towards nine o'clock Cécile came to draw the curtains and open the window, and laid the breakfast tray on the bed in which Antoinette was leaning back against the pillow, Dominique's nostrils quivered as if, across the street, it were possible to catch the scent of the young woman stretching there in the sunlight, swelling with life, her eyes and her lips greedy, her flesh rested and as though impregnated anew with the voluptuous pleasure of sleep.

Caille had left early for the station, where he was to meet his parents-in-law, and Lina was giving the last touches to her rooms. She could be heard humming as she moved to and fro between the bedroom and the drawing-room charged with the scent of the flowers.

The postman had gone by at a quarter past eight. Antoinette would soon receive the letter. But Dominique no longer expected anything of that letter. She felt ashamed of it, like someone who has struck out in a blind rage with some harmless weapon and has not caused even a scratch.

It would not have taken much, so disgusted was she with herself, to prevent her from witnessing the scene. She was tempted to choose that moment to go and do her shopping. She was empty. She was floundering about, as in those vague dreams that come towards morning after a bad night; and her room seemed to her lamentably

dreary, her life more wan than the little flame that always seems on the point of going out in front of the altar. The memory of Jacques Améraud was growing dim, and she felt a grudge against the old and gentle Madame Améraud, as if *she* had encouraged her, in her renunciation.

How many times since her mother's death had she not heard the ladies of the clan—Angibauds, Caillés, de Chail-lous—saying to her with uniform unctiōn:

“Your mother, my child, was a saint!”

She had not tried to clarify these words. Any more than, as a little girl, she had been allowed to inquire the meaning of the sixth commandment, to pronounce—otherwise than as an incantation: “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”

What had occurred, somewhere in her sixth or seventh year, to transform the atmosphere of the house? Her memories were vague, yet vivid. Before that time there had been laughter, real laughter, about her. She had often heard her father whistling in the bathroom. They went out together on Sundays.

Then her mother had been ill and had kept to her room for long weeks together. Her father, grown grave and furtive, was always kept away from home by his duties or shut up in his study.

Never had she heard the least allusion to the event which had occurred.

“Your mother is a saint. . . .”

And her father was a man! This characteristic came to her suddenly, with blinding clarity. Her father smelt of tobacco, of drink, of the barracks.

Her father, in short, from the time she was seven, had no longer been part of the family. It was no longer he,

it was only Lieutenant-Colonel Salès—later the general—who belonged to the clan. Not the man. Not the husband.

What terrible offence had he committed for him to be thus outlawed, for his wife to be no more than the shadow of a woman, a shadow growing fainter and fainter and finally flickering out altogether while still quite young? What had he done that she, Dominique, had never loved him, had never been tempted to love him, had never wondered why she did not love him?

She met her own gaze in the mirror, and she made an effort to soften its harshness. She realised that she was in process of calling to account her ghosts, all those things—comforting shadows, bright memories, scents of by-gone days, pious objects—which had borne her company in her solitude like muted music.

Across the street from her, Antoinette was yawning, running her fingers through her heavy tresses and stroking her bosom. Then, turning towards the door, she said:

“What is it, Cécile?”

The post. Before reading it, she sat on the edge of the bed, hunting for her slippers with her bare toes, and her calm shamelessness no longer shocked Dominique. She understood now, and she could have wished Antoinette more beautiful and more glamorous still, attended by a train of servants and stepping into a marble bath.

Old Madame Rouet was in her tower. She was another who would never let herself be seen in *négligée*, who seemed to emerge from the night in full armour, her features already hard and her eye cold and clear.

Antoinette was still yawning and drinking a sip of breakfast coffee, tearing open an envelope, putting an

invoice down beside her on the bed, then another letter of which she read only the opening lines.

Then it was the turn of Dominique's message. Antoinette opened the envelope without looking at it, read the few words of the note, frowned as if she did not understand, and then, quite naturally, with a calm movement, picked up the envelope from the bedside rug where it had fallen in a crumpled ball.

*"You killed your husband
You know you did."*

How Dominique would have liked to take it back from her! How utterly childish were the words that had sought to be vengeful and cruel—how foolishly harmless was the weapon!

She had killed her husband? Perhaps. Not even that. She had not prevented him from dying.

And those words—hateful by the sheer weight of their silliness:

"You know you did."

No, Antoinette did not know it, she did not feel it. And the proof was the way she re-read the letter in an effort to understand, remaining pensive for a moment, without once looking at the window opposite. She was thinking.

Who could have done this spiteful thing to her?

Not a glance either at the mantelpiece, where the green plant—to think that Dominique had looked up its correct name in a work on botany!—where the green plant had still been standing the day before!

On the contrary, she raised her head. It was towards

the ceiling that she turned, towards the tower where her gaoler was on guard duty. The old lady?

The old lady?

Why should she have written to her?

Antoinette shrugged her shoulders. That was not it. Was she going to wear herself out in searching further? Was she going to worry and fret?

She let the sheet of paper fall by the others, and came to the window to breathe the air of the street, to fill her eyes with the splashes of sunlight and the figures in movement. Doubtless she was still giving a little thought to the matter.

No! It was not her mother-in-law. She, true enough, was convinced that Antoinette had killed her son, but not in that fashion. It was a feeling rather than a certainty or even a suspicion—the feeling a mother-in-law would naturally entertain towards the detested widow of her child.

Oddly enough, Dominique took fright lest Antoinette's gaze should come to rest on her window, on her, on her skimpy shape scurrying about a room she was suddenly ashamed of: and she went to shut the window, taking care not to show herself.

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The noise began on the stairs, a floor below—cheerful talk, a man's big voice, a woman's laugh, then Albert Caille, extremely animated, fumbling as he tried to find the keyhole, an overdone exclamation of wonder, the vulgarity of which made Dominique think of the flushed wedding parties to be seen issuing on to suburban pavements.

Lina rushed forward, exclaiming:

"Mama!"

She must be lingering in her mother's arms for a long time, for papa's big voice grumbled humorously:

"Now then, don't I count any more?"

Dominique could see nothing and yet she called up a colourful scene—crude colours, big solid masses, a clean-shaven man, well dressed and smelling of eau de Cologne, thoroughly proud of being himself, an important provincial manufacturer, thoroughly proud of coming to Paris to see his married daughter for the first time.

Lina was playing the guessing game.

"What is it?"

"Guess."

"I don't know . . . Give . . ."

"When you've guessed . . ."

"A dress?"

"Dresses aren't brought from Fontenay-la-Comte to a young lady living in Paris . . ."

"The box is too big for jewellery—Give, papa . . ."

"When you've guessed . . ."

She grew impatient, stamping her foot as she laughed, crying out to her mother:

"I forbid you to rummage in my chest of drawers . . . Albert! Stop Mama from upsetting our things . . . Now, Papa, be good . . . Ah! I knew you'd give in . . . Where are the scissors? . . . Albert, hand me the scissors . . . It's . . . What is it? . . . Wait! A divan-cover! . . . Come and see, Albert! . . . Just the shade of pink I adore . . . Thank-you, Papa . . . Thank-you, Mama . . ."

Why did her mother begin speaking in a low voice? Because they were talking of the landlady no doubt.

Where is she? What is she doing? What is she like? Is she nice to you?

She was answered in whispers. Dominique could have sworn that the father had taken off his jacket, and that the sleeves of his immaculate shirt made two dazzling splashes of white in the room.

These folk were not members of the clan either. Their exuberance touched Dominique on the raw in her inmost, her most "Salès-le Bret" nerve-fibres. Nevertheless she could find certain points of contact, particularly in the whispering of the mother, whom she pictured as small and rather fat, dressed in black silk, with two or three jewels which she wore only on grand occasions.

Quickly, she changed her clothes and put on her best dress, glancing round to make sure there was nothing untidy about her. An automatic reflex made her look at the photograph of her father in general's full-dress uniform, with his medals hanging on the frame.

Another rapid look across the street through the glass of the windows and the muslin of the curtains, a look in Antoinette's direction, to ask her pardon.

The whisperings were not in the bedroom now, but in the drawing-room. There was a cough. There was a gentle knock on the door.

"Excuse me, mademoiselle . . . I am Lina's mother . . ."

She was tiny and dressed in black silk as Dominique had imagined her, only thinner and livelier—one of those women who spend their lives running up and down the stairs of a too big provincial house in pursuit of disorder.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

"Not in the least, I assure you. Do please come in."

The words came of themselves from very far away, as

did the slightly reserved attitude and the overdone smile, with, however, a suitable touch of melancholy, and a touch too of the indulgence proper in the case of newly-weds.

"I wanted so much to thank you for all the kindness you are showing to these children . . . I must ask you whether they disturb you too much . . . I know them so well, you know! At their age, one is not often thoughtful for others . . ."

"I assure you I have no grounds for complaining of them."

The door had been left open. The drawing-room was empty and the flowers were in their places. Dominique would have taken a bet that Lina was eyeing her husband as she restrained her longing to burst into laughter. . . .

"Mama is with the dragon . . ."

Perhaps they had held a whispered discussion before taking this step?

"You go alone, Mama . . . I swear it's better if you go alone . . . I couldn't keep a straight face . . ."

"Come with me, Jules . . ."

"No, look now . . . It's much better for women to get together about that sort of thing . . ."

They had watched her go . . . They were all there listening. . . In a few minutes the mother would be telling them that Dominique had put on her best dress to receive her . . .

"Won't you please sit down . . ."

"I'm only staying for a moment . . . I should hate to disturb you . . . We would have preferred to see the children settled in their own place with their own furniture by now . . . All the more natural, seeing my hus-

band manufactures furniture . . . They didn't want to . . . They say they'd sooner get to know Paris well first and choose their district to live in . . . My son-in-law has his career to make . . . He's doing very well already, considering his age . . . You've read his articles? . . ."

Dominique, not daring to say yes, slowly nodded by way of affirmative.

"We are so glad, my husband and I, to think they are with someone like you . . . Not for the world would I have had them stay in an hotel, or some boarding-house . . ."

A glance at the portrait, the decorations.

"Your late father?"

The same slight affirmative gesture of the head, with that infinitesimal touch of prideful humility which sits properly on a general's daughter.

"I hope you won't take it amiss that my husband and I have taken the liberty of bringing you a little souvenir to show how grateful we are—oh yes, grateful—for what you are doing for the children . . ."

She fetched the parcel from the drawing-room table, for she had not dared make her entry with it in her hand. Dominique guessed that it had not been brought for her. There had been a whispered argument in the bedroom.

"Better give it to her . . . I'll send you another one . . ."

It was a little alabaster bedside lamp, which they had taken from their shop, for they also went in for interior decorating.

"Nothing very special . . ."

She did not know what else to say. She had had time to glance about her once or twice. She had seen everything. She smiled afresh.

"Thank you once again . . . I won't take up any more

of your time . . . We are only stopping in Paris till tomorrow evening and we still have everything to visit . . . Good-bye for now, mademoiselle. If the children make too much noise, or if they don't behave, don't hesitate to speak to them about it . . . They're so young!"

That was all. Dominique was alone. Silence next door, where the mother had rejoined the family. More on her guard than her daughter, she had spotted the communicating door and she must have put a finger to her lips. Lina held back the laugh she would have liked to let break out. A moment or two while they found their normal voices, and then the mother spoke deliberately aloud.

"Suppose we took advantage of its not being too hot yet, and went to the Zoo at Vincennes?"

The charm was broken. They all talked at once and got ready in a hubbub. The noise made its way into the drawing-room, tailed off towards the double door and faded away on the staircase.

Dominique was alone. Automatically she began to take off her dress and lit the gas, which made a plop. The window was shut, she could not be seen and she remained in her slip, as if out of defiance.

Defiance of whom?

Was it of these people—their name was Plissoneau—all dressed up to visit their daughter in Paris?

Yet another marriage which could not have run smoothly. The Plissoneaus were more than comfortably off. Albert Caille was a policeman's son. From time to time he sold an article or a story to the papers, but was that a career? Why, the very way Madame Plissoneau had spoken of it . . .

Why did she remain half-naked, intentionally, looking at herself each time she passed in front of the wardrobe mirror? Was it Antoinette, who took no interest in her, and who probably did not even know of her existence—was it she that Dominique sought to defy?

Or was it her ghosts—which she never called up now without a bitter look, as though they had shabbily betrayed her?

Was it not rather herself that she was defying, as she let the raw daylight play on the pallid skin of her legs and thighs, her angular shoulders and her neck set between two salt-cellar?

“See what you are, Nique! See what you’ve become!”

Nique! They had called her Nique! Her aunts and her women cousins still called her that in their letters. For they did write to one another from time to time—at the new year, or for a marriage, birth or bereavement. They exchanged news of one another, using first names which evoked mere children and yet referred now to grown-ups.

“Henri has been posted to Casablanca and his wife complains of the climate. You remember little Camilla who had such lovely hair. She has just had her third baby. Pierre is worried, because she is not strong and she won’t look after herself properly. He’s relying on Aunt Clémentine to make her understand that in her condition . . .”

Nique! Nique and her long crooked nose, which had caused her so much suffering!

For a long time now she had ceased to be Nique except in those letters piling up in a stale-smelling drawer.

Why! she had never noticed on her thighs—she did not think the word “thighs”, one said “legs” from the

heels right up to the waist—she had never noticed these thin blue lines that were like the rivers on the maps in geography. Wasn't it Aunt Gérardine, her mother's sister—she had married an engineer in the explosives corps and they owned a villa at La Baule—wasn't it Aunt Gérardine who used to complain of her varicose veins?

She was on the point of crying. No, she would not cry. Why should she cry? It was she who had wished it so. She had remained faithful to her vow, faithful to Jacques Améraud.

She no longer believed in it. Was it true she no longer believed in it? It's not possible to peel potatoes and scrape carrots in one's slip. She must get dressed.

But not before she had posted herself behind the window-curtain, not before she had cast a long, deep look opposite, where, in the untidy bedroom, in the bedroom redolent of woman, redolent of all the desires of woman, Antoinette had gone back to bed, not between the bedclothes, but on top of them.

With her head on the pillows, she was reading a book in a yellow jacket, holding it up at the level of her eyes. One leg hung down from the bed on to the rug, and one hand mechanically caressed her side through the silk of her undergarment.

"What is it, Cécile?"

Cécile would have liked to begin doing the room, as was done in all the other houses, where the bedclothes could be seen airing on the window-ledges.

What did Antoinette care?

"Go ahead . . ."

She went on reading. The rugs were shaken around her, things were tidied. Cécile bustled about, small, stiff

and scornful. She would go and tell the story to the dragon in the tower. What sort of a life was this?

Antoinette confined herself to changing her place and settling on the couch when at length the bed had to be made.

Dominique had not yet gone down to do her shopping. She still had a headache. She slipped on her darned frock and put on her hat. It was four years old, it was of no known fashion and soon it would be the anonymous hat of an old maid. She looked for her shopping bag.

The air was heavy. Perhaps today the storm would break at last. The sun was without brilliance and veiled, the sky like lead. The concierge was swilling down the porch. As she passed a little bar a few houses lower down, kept by some people from Auvergne from whom she bought her wood, there wafted into Dominique's face a strong smell of wine. She heard the black-faced man talking in his sonorous accent. In the cellar-like darkness where the only shining thing was the polished zinc of the counter, she saw some blouse-clad masons chatting away, glass in hand, as if time had stayed its course.

She had never looked into a place of this kind, though she had passed in front of this one so often. The picture etched itself on her memory—the smell, the thickness of the air, the bluish shadows in the far corners, the brown of the stuff of the masons' blouses, the tint of violet in the bottom of the thick glasses. The moustaches of the man from Auvergne were lost in the black of the coal-dust on his face, in which his eyes stood out in white. The sonorities of his voice pursued Dominique through the fiery heat of the street with its great dead surfaces of grey wall and its open windows, and along the asphalt

melting under the shattering green and white omnibuses, whose conductors pulled at their bells.

She read vaguely: *Place d'Iéna* . . .

Place d'Iéna? . . . She wrinkled her brows, halted for a moment on the pavement. An urchin knocked against her as he ran by. *Place d'Iéna?* . . . The bus was far away . . . She gripped her purse tighter in her hand . . . She had been dreaming in mid-street. She roused herself, passed from the shade to the sunshine and went through the door of Sionneau's delicatessen, where she was going to buy a chop.

"Not too thick . . . In the bag . . ."

She avoided the mirrors which pursued her right round the shop, and her gorge rose at the sight of mince on a livid plate running with pink blood.

PART TWO

ACROSS
THE
STREET

Confectioner's or chocolate shop.

ON the edge of the Rond-point des Champs Elysées, at the corner of the Rue Montaigne, there was a confectioner's or chocolate shop. The outside of the entire ground floor was faced with a uniform black marble, like a tomb. Three windows stood out, with no surrounding frame, and on the white plush in these windows there was nothing to see except two or three boxes of sweets or chocolates, all the same, in mauve and silver.

After that there was nothing. The rest of the Rue Montaigne was no more than a kind of canal glistening in the rain between the black walls of the houses. There was nobody, there was nothing, except, in the foreground, a handcart with its shafts in the air, reflected in the wet mirror of the asphalt, and very far off, near the Faubourg Saint Honoré, the violet rear of a parked taxi.

Overhead the rain fell with an unceasing murmur. Great drops broke loose from the cornices, gutter-spouts emptied at intervals along the pavement and each porch exhaled an icy breath.

For Dominique the Rue Montaigne had, always would have, a smell of umbrellas and wet navy-blue serge. She would see herself eternally on the same spot on the left-hand pavement, fifty yards from the Rond-point, in front of a narrow shop window—the only one in the street apart from the confectioner's on the corner—in which there was a display of heaped up balls of knitting wool.

People ridiculed her, she knew, without any attempt at concealment. From time to time she would lift her nose—slightly too long and slightly crooked—and look calmly at the half-moon-shaped windows of the intermediate floor at number 27.

Four o'clock had struck a short time before. It was November. It was not yet night. The gloom which had prevailed all day was growing thicker, and grey was turning to darkness. Only the sky above the street still retained a faint touch of light. Here and there in the houses lights had been lit and two great white globes burned on the intermediate floor with the half-moon windows, where twenty, twenty-five, perhaps more, girls, all aged between fifteen and twenty, and all dressed in grey smocks, were at work on cardboard—gluing, folding, passing the boxes from one to another down two long tables. Sometimes they would turn towards the street and burst out laughing as they drew one another's attention to Dominique silhouetted under her umbrella.

It was the fourth, no, the fifth time she had waited thus, and who could have believed it was not on her own account that she was waiting? The girls, seeing her stand for a quarter of an hour, for half an hour, and then go away alone, must think that he was not coming, that he never did, never would, come; and that pleased them enormously.

Why today in particular, just as she crossed the Rond-point, at the very instant when there opened before her the cold wet perspective of the Rue Montaigne with its appearance of draining itself away—why had she felt the premonition that it was all over? Now she was almost certain. Had Antoinette for her part felt it too? Why was

she still clinging to hope, when it was already twenty past four?

As had happened the last time or two, it was Dominique who had been ready first. She was no longer afraid of ridicule. She was on her feet, at home, dressed in her navy-blue costume, with her hat on and already wearing her gloves, her umbrella on a chair within reach of her hand. Ever since the windows had been permanently shut for the winter, she had had to exercise more attention, sometimes second sight, to understand the comings and goings in the house opposite, but Dominique had come to know it so well!

Antoinette had lunched upstairs with her parents-in-law, as she had been doing since the family had come back from Trouville. She was being nice to them, living almost entirely with them.

Every Wednesday and every Friday she had to invent some pretext. What had she said? That she was going to her mother's, in the big block in the Rue Caulaincourt with its windows giving directly on to the cemetery? No doubt that was it, for she had telephoned, holding her hand in front of her mouth to muffle her voice so as not to be heard upstairs. She had taken advantage of a moment when Cécile had gone out.

"Is that you, Mama? I'm coming to look you up this afternoon . . . In short, you understand . . . Yes . . . Oh yes—very happy! . . ." (her smile, all the same, was somewhat clouded) "But of course, Mama, I'm very careful . . . Goodbye, Mama . . . One of these days, yes . . ."

At lunch with the Rouets she must have appeared gay. She did everything that was necessary. Often she would

spend hours alone with her mother-in-law, as if in payment for the liberty of her Wednesdays and Fridays.

At half-past three she had not yet gone downstairs and only Dominique had been ready. Had Madame Rouet tried to keep her back? Twenty to four . . . a quarter to four . . . Finally she appeared, in a fever of haste, dressing herself with hurried, jerky movements, glancing anxiously at the clock, putting on her black silk coat and her silver foxes. On the stairs she must have gone back several steps to get the umbrella she had forgotten.

She was outside. Dominique followed her. She walked along the pavement of the Avenue Victor Emmanuel without stopping or turning round, her umbrella tilted a little because of the breeze which always blows along the Avenue. She was on her way to her Rue Montaigne. Had the Rue Montaigne ceased for her too, as it had for Dominique, to be an ordinary street like any other?

For Dominique, at any rate, that street had a face, a soul, and today that soul had suddenly revealed itself as cold, with something funereal about it.

Very quickly, some twenty yards ahead on the right, Antoinette had turned the handle of a door hidden by a cream-coloured curtain, and had gone into a bar over which, too high up, hung a sign on which was painted in raw white "English Bar."

He had not arrived, otherwise they would have come out at once. Dominique had merely glimpsed, very close to the door, the tall mahogany counter, the silver tankards, the little flags in the glasses, the red hair of the woman who kept the place.

No-one but Antoinette could have powdered her nose

mechanically while she confided to her accomplice behind the bar:

"He's late again!"

The little bar was always empty and so discreet that it could be passed a dozen times without its existence being suspected. Behind the thick curtain there were only three dark tables, at which it seemed that women like Antoinette must take it in turns to wait, for they were never to be found together.

The minutes passed. The girls in the box-making work-room, under the opaque globes, still spied on the waiting Dominique, and commiserated sardonically with her.

Dominique was without shame. She was no longer ashamed for herself; and when, through the window cluttered with balls of wool, an old lady stared too hard at her, she merely took two or three steps under her umbrella, without any attempt not to look like a woman who is waiting.

At the beginning, immediately after Trouville, he had been the first to arrive. The very first time of all Antoinette had not had to go inside. He was on the watch, holding the door-curtain to one side. He had come out. He had murmured a few words as he scanned each end of the street. Then he had walked ahead, while she had followed a few paces behind, both of them hugging the wall as they went; and a little short of the Faubourg Saint Honoré the man had turned round before he was engulfed in the entrance of an hotel.

The posts of the double swing door were white. An imitation marble plaque announced: *Hotel de Montmorency—All modern conveniences*. A red carpet could be seen in the lobby, and potted palms. The passer-by met blasts

of centrally heated air, the stale smell of hotels frequented by regular clients. Antoinette had entered afterwards. A little later, a floor-waiter had drawn the curtains of a first-floor window, a faint light had shown behind the curtains and the rest was silence. There had been nothing left in the street except Dominique making her departure, her throat tight and her skin damp.

The time had soon come when Antoinette walked ahead as they left the little bar. She walked quickly. Was it out of fear of being met by someone who knew her? Out of shame? Or in order to bury herself the sooner in the warmth of the room with its dark red hangings, where she already had her habitual ways of doing things?

Perhaps today she was confiding in the red-haired woman at the *English Bar*, for she was one of those who can tell their sorrows to another woman—to that sort of woman who knows everything and understands everything, especially in that field.

"I should have thought he would at least have left a note. You're sure there's nothing? The arrangement was that if he should be detained he would drop a letter in as he went by . . . Perhaps he telephoned and Angèle took the call? . . ."

She already knew the name of the servant who sometimes took her mistress's place behind the bar.

On the shelves at the back three or four letters were propped up between glasses. The envelopes bore only first names: Mademoiselle Gisèle, Monsieur Jean . . .

The rain was falling audibly and sometimes the pattering was rather louder, the drops rebounding higher from the glistening asphalt. It was growing darker. The light went on in a concierge's lodge and another light on an

upper floor. Someone approached, but turned into a house before reaching the *English Bar*.

He would not come, Dominique was sure. She was free to go, but she felt she must stay. Her right hand was clenched round the handle of her umbrella. She was very pale in the poor light, and the girls in the box work-room must think she was looking ill.

It didn't matter. She was no longer afraid of those eyes peering from the houses, nor of the lives to be discovered by looking in through doors or windows. Her unruffled attitude was a challenge. She was not frightened of being taken for a woman in love, for a woman in love about to be left flat. She even took on involuntarily the attitude of such a woman, miming her anxiety and starting when someone came round the corner of the street.

Antoinette was drinking something through a straw, looking at the time by the little clock on the shelf and checking it against her wrist-watch.

Half-past four. Four thirty-five. She had promised herself to wait a quarter of an hour, then half an hour. She decided:

"Five minutes more . . ."

She powdered her face again and smeared red on her lips.

"If by any chance he should come, you might tell him . . ."

It seemed as if Dominique sensed that she was about to leave, as if invisible bonds linked the two women. She left her post in front of the display of knitting wool and gave a last look at the half-moon windows. Laugh away, young ladies, little fools that you are. He has not come!

And Dominique was quite close to the door of the bar

when Antoinette came out, in such a state that it was a minute or two before she could manage to open her umbrella.

Their eyes met. At first glance Antoinette saw just an ordinary woman who happened to be passing. She looked again, as though something had struck her. Had she recognised that face half seen occasionally at a window? Or was she rather astonished to see in another woman's face the reflection as it were of her own? Dominique's dark-ringed eyes seemed to be saying to her:

"He has not come, I know. I foresaw it. He will not come any more."

It lasted only a few seconds. Had it lasted even as long as seconds? At the corner of the street her hopes rose again. She paused before the mauve and silver boxes of the sweetshop. A passing taxi splashed her. She hoped it would stop, but it went on its way, and Antoinette started off again, quitting the deserted street on the far end of which opened the white door of an hotel, with its red carpet and palms, its warmth still redolent of bodies undressing behind drawn curtains.

Her gait was jerky. She was about to call a taxi. She changed her mind and turned into the Champs Elysées. She halted to let a string of cars go by. A large café. An orchestra. She slipped between the tables and reached the downstairs room through a murmur of conversations. On the little tables there were cakes, chocolate, silver tea-pots. There were many women, some of them alone and waiting as she had been waiting just now. She dropped into a green leather seat in a corner and pushed back her fox furs with an automatic gesture.

"Tea . . . Writing paper . . ."

Her eyes picked up Dominique who had sat down not far from her, as though incapable of breaking the spell that joined them each to each. She frowned, trying to remember.

Was she thinking of the two anonymous notes she had received some time since? No. Perhaps she was wondering for a moment whether her mother-in-law was having her followed? Oh no! It wasn't possible. She shrugged her shoulders. It didn't matter. She was pale. She opened her bag and took the cap off a little gold fountain-pen. She was about to write. The words had been ready but now, look, she had lost them, and she ranged round her with unseeing eyes.

Suddenly she got up and went towards the telephones and bought a token. She remained for a moment in the silence of one of the boxes where she could be seen through the diamond-shaped window.

Where had she telephoned to? Home? No. More likely to a bar which he often visited, further up this same Champs Elysées. She must be speaking a first name.

He was not there. She came out to ask for another token, casting at Dominique a glance in which some impatience could be read.

No! He was not there either. So, letting her tea grow cold, she began to write. She tore up her letter and started again. She must have begun by reproaching him. Now she was imploring, humbling herself too far. It could be read in her face, for she was acting her letter. She was on the point of tears, then she tore it up once more. What was needed . . . A brief note, dry, indifferent . . . The pen became sharper, the letters taller . . . A brief note which . . .

She lifted her head because a man's silhouette was passing in front of her and for one second she had had the crazy hope that it was he. The unknown, too, was tall. He wore the same long overcoat, smartly cut, the same black felt hat. In the Champs Elysées there were some hundreds of men who were similarly dressed, walked in the same way, made the same movements, went to the same hairdresser. But it was not he, with his long pale face and his thin lips with their very private smile.

Why had Dominique in her own mind called him the Italian? She could have sworn he was Italian. Not the petulant or languishing type, as Italians were commonly represented. An Italian with a frigid exterior and measured gestures.

"Waiter!"

It was an express letter she had written in the end. She licked the gum with the tip of her tongue.

The waiter in his turn called:

"Messenger!"

It was bright and warm; the air was vibrant with voices, music and the clash of glasses and saucers; every face was pink on account of the lighting. It was impossible to imagine that the rain was falling outside, and that the Rue Montaigne was looking more and more like a canal, without a soul on the long expanse of shining water, while the electric lamps came on one after another along the banks.

Antoinette had nothing left to do. She could not go home so soon. She looked about her, thinking she recognised a young woman in brown who was nursing a little dog on her lap. She began to smile but the woman looked at her uncomprehendingly, and Antoinette realised she

had made a mistake and that there was only a vague resemblance. She recovered her composure by drinking a sip of her tea, which she had forgotten to sugar.

Was she still aware of Dominique's presence, of those eyes staring at her with such burning intensity that she ought surely to perceive their influence? For a long time Antoinette did not turn her way. Then, after a furtive glance, her eyes came back to Dominique, questioning.

She was too badly beaten to be proud.

"Why?" she seemed to be asking. "Why are you here? Why are you the one that appears to be suffering?"

And Dominique shuddered from head to foot. She was living that bitter moment with as much intensity as Antoinette, if not more, savouring the irony of the contrast between the music and the crowd and the looked for warmth and intimacy of that first-floor room whose very ordinariness was one attraction the more.

Antoinette had lived through Trouville. One fine day Dominique had observed that bags were being strapped up, on both floors at once. The whole party had left in the evening, including Cécile and the old Rouets' maid. The shutters had been closed. For weeks Dominique had had nothing to look at but those closed shutters. She had not even had close at hand the echoes of the life of the Cailles, for they too had gone away to spend a few weeks in a little villa which the Plissoneaus had rented at Fouras.

The Cailles had sent her a dull, badly-printed postcard, depicting a handful of wretched huts behind a sand-dune, and they had marked a cross over one of the huts.

She did not know the Rouets' property. She had seen Trouville only once, for a few hours, when she was young and when striped bathing suits were still worn. She could

not picture it. All she knew was that they were in mourning, and accordingly could not join in the light-hearted spirit of the holidays.

For a month Dominique had drifted freely in her solitariness, seized sometimes by such anguish that she had to rub shoulders with the crowd—any crowd, the one in the street or in the great boulevards or in the cinemas. She had never walked so much in her life, until she grew sick of walking—in the sun, in front of café terraces or in streets as quiet as streets in provincial towns where she peered into the windows, those pockets of shadow in the houses.

Down at Trouville Antoinette, God knows how, had met the Italian. She had been removed there, antagonistic, inert, like a hostage. She had followed her parents-in-law against her will, not daring to oppose them openly, dreaming of the day when she would be free.

And then, when they got back, she might have been their daughter. From the moment of their return, following what had been their habit at Trouville where they had lived as one family, she had taken her meals upstairs. They kept house together, so to speak, and when Antoinette did not go upstairs for the afternoon, Madame Rouet came down, her stick innocent of any threat.

Dominique had not needed more than a couple of days to understand how things were. At eleven o'clock each morning she had seen a man walking up and down several times. And behind the window Antoinette's finger had signalled:

"No . . . Not today . . . Not yet . . ."

She had first to organise her life in Paris: she had to warn her mother. The first expedition had been to the

Rue Caulaincourt. An exuberant, expansive Antoinette, who no doubt threw her hat into the dining-room and dropped into an armchair:

"Listen, Mama . . . I've got some news . . . I must tell you all about it . . . If only you knew . . ."

In the Rue Caulaincourt you could speak your mind, you could spread yourself, you could behave as you pleased, you could give your moods free rein. It was home. Mother and daughters were of the same breed.

"If only you knew what a man he is! . . . Well, I tread softly, you understand. I flatter the old lady—I spend whole afternoons with her sewing . . . I must have at least two afternoons free a week . . . They would think I was coming to see you . . ."

She had scoured the shops, buying new outfits, deliberately chosen on the sober side, because of the old lady.

At last one day her finger behind the window had signalled:

"Yes."

Then it had gone into detail:

"Four . . . four o'clock . . ."

Antoinette had sung. She had remained shut in the bathroom for an hour. She would certainly have appeared too gay at lunch, had she not, the better to deceive them, made a pretence of depression.

Now she was alive. She was about to live. She had begun to live. Body and soul, she was satisfied. She was going to see him and be alone with him, naked against his nakedness. She was about to live the sole life worth living.

Her excitement made her stumble on the kerb and neglect to look behind her. At the corner of the Rue

Montaigne she cast about. She did not yet know the little bar whose address had been given to her. A hand lifted the curtain. The door opened. A man walked ahead and she followed him, disappearing behind him, swallowed up in the warm lobby of the hotel.

Since then the days had drawn in. The first few times, sunshine still lingered in the streets.

Now the lights were lit in the houses; and the week before it had been fully night when Antoinette came out of the Hotel de Montmorency a minute or two before her companion, and hailed a taxi at the corner of the street to take her the few hundred yards between herself and home.

It was all over. He would not come any more. Dominique was certain he would not come again. The last time the two of them had remained for a quarter of an hour in the little bar. Why? Unless he was explaining that he could not stay with her that day, that a business appointment obliged him to be somewhere else, while she must be pleading:

"Just a few minutes . . ."

They sat in the corner close to the window. The bar was so tiny that they had to speak softly. In order not to embarrass them, the landlady had gone down the spiral staircase leading from behind the bar to the cellar, which had been converted into a kitchen. They whispered, holding hands. The man was embarrassed.

"Just a few minutes! . . ."

She knew she was losing him, but she refused to believe it. He rose.

"Friday?"

"Friday's impossible . . . I have to leave on a trip . . ."

"Wednesday?"

Today was Wednesday, and he had not come. Very soon now, in a bar at the top of the Champs Elysées, the barman would hand him an express message bearing his name. He would be with friends, and he would say casually:

"I know what it is . . ."

Perhaps he would stuff the letter into his pocket without reading it?

"Waiter!"

Her hands damp, she hunted in her bag for change, and her eyes once again fell on Dominique, staring at her.

What did Dominique care? Did not the girls in the box workroom make fun of her? She did not even make a pretence of being interested in something else. She was like the little brother and sister whom she called "the poor children," when she was six. It was at Orange. Every day, at the same hour, her nursemaid took her out with her toys on the rampart walk. They would settle down on a bench, and invariably the two poor children would come and station themselves two or three yards away, the brother and the sister, ragged, dirty-faced, with scurf in their hair and at the corners of their mouths.

Without the least shame they would remain there, watching her play all by herself. They would not budge. The maid would shout:

"Go and play somewhere else!"

They would merely draw back one step and stop motionless once more.

"Don't go near them, Nique . . . you'll catch little animals . . ."

They heard. Evidently they did not mind, for they did

not flinch, and in the end the nurse, adding actions to words, would get up, would wave her arms and, as if scaring sparrows, would go:

"Brr—brr—brr . . ."

It mattered very little that Antoinette shrugged her shoulders scornfully as she passed in front of Dominique. Dominique conveyed her message to her all the same. It was nothing but a look. So much the worse if it was not understood. That look said:

"You see, I know the whole story from the beginning . . . I did not understand at first, and I was stupidly malicious. I wrote the two letters to frighten you and to prevent you from enjoying the results of your crime . . . I did not yet know you . . . I did not know that you could not act otherwise . . . It was life that was driving you on, you needed to live . . . You did everything for that . . . You would have gone even further . . . You went to Trouville with the old dragon from the tower . . . From a distance you watched people who were enjoying themselves, who seemed to be living. And, in order to live in your turn, you were strong enough to go and eat your meals upstairs, smile at old Madame Rouet, sit opposite her and sew, listen to her interminable reminiscences of her grub of a son . . .

"Those moments in the little bar, the hours in the Hotel Montmorency, were enough to pay for all that. You tried to prolong them. You tried to prolong the touch of a skin against yours; and in the evening, alone in your bed, you would seek, through the odour of your own body, to catch, however faintly, the odour of the man's . . .

"He did not come today. He will not come again any more . . .

"I know. I understand.

"For weeks your windows were shut, and the forbidding brown of the shutters continued the brown of the wall. There was nothing living opposite me, nothing either in the flat. I was alone. I used to put on my hat without looking in the glass. I used to go down into the street like the poor, who own nothing save what some passer-by lets fall as he disappears.

"That is the state I have reached.

"He did not come. It's all over. *What are we going to do?*"

For a moment it seemed to Dominique that Antoinette was going to come up and speak to her. They would leave the vast swarming café together, would plunge side by side into the wet stillness of the night.

"So much effort, so much energy, so much fierce willing—only to end in . . ."

Must everything begin all over again? Must she find another man, other days no doubt than Wednesday and Friday, another, but similar, little bar, a hotel to engulf them one after the other?

It was a question now that Dominique's eyes expressed, because Antoinette knew better than she did:

"Is it that?"

Was that what she had been dreaming of on a certain night when she could not sleep, and, leaning out of her window in a nightdress, her shoulders white in the moonlight, had contemplated the sky? Was that what she had been thinking of when, with one hand on the doorpost, she had waited for her husband to die so that she could enter the room and pour out the medicine on the leaf mould in which the *Phoenix Robelini* was bedded?

Antoinette was suffering. She was suffering so much that, if the man had come in, she could have grovelled at his feet there in front of everybody.

And yet Dominique envied her. She had taken for herself, she had stolen furtively and in passing a share of it all, the good and the bad. The sight of the little bar had been a blow at her heart. Her skin had gone damp as she passed the cream-coloured front of the Hotel Montmorency. What were they going to do now? For Dominique could not imagine that there would be nothing more. Life had to go on.

One behind the other, they took the first street on the right and crossed the lighted rectangle of a cinema as though it were a ditch. The shop windows were brilliantly lit up; the buses, because the street was narrow, scraped the kerb; silhouettes crossed one another, brushing against each other. Antoinette turned round impatiently, but behind her, in the cross-hatching of the rain, there was merely an insignificant little body under an umbrella, a commonplace outline, a woman neither old nor young, neither plain nor pretty, not very strong-looking, too pale, the nose rather long and slightly askew—Dominique, walking with hurried steps past the window displays, like just any woman going just anywhere, moving her lips in the solitude of the crowd.

II

"Cécile! Do you know whether Madame Antoinette has come in?"

"Nearly an hour ago, Madame."

"What is she doing?"

"Lying on her bed fully dressed, with her shoes covered in mud."

"I expect she has gone to sleep. Go and tell her to come upstairs. The master will be home any minute."

Night was falling early and the windows were shut, preventing all contact between the wet, cold outer air and the little cubes of warm air forming the cells in which people were preserved. Perhaps because of the thick, yellowish light, the screen formed by windows and curtains, the rain casting a cloak of silence over all movement, the beings in the houses appeared strangely immobile; and even when they did stir their limbs, they stretched themselves in slow time, their mute pantomime unrolling itself in a nightmare world where things were in their places for all eternity—a corner of a sideboard, the shine on a piece of chipped crockery, the angle of a half-open door or the dim perspective of a mirror.

There was no fire now in Dominique's flat—nothing to welcome her or make her feel at home except the smell of gas, the smell which hung about longest of all. She was really poor. It was no game that made her reckon her spending in centimes. If there was a game, if she sometimes got to the point of feeling self-satisfied like those

fanatics who practise mortification, it was only an after-thought, an instinctive, unconscious defence—the conversion of a cold necessity into a vice in order to make it seem more human. In the square grate there was never more than one log burning at a time, a little log that she made last as long as possible, an operation at which she had become highly skilled. Ten, twenty times, she would alter the angle at which the log lay, letting it char only on one side, then on the other, almost regulating, like that of a paraffin lamp, the flame that licked the wood. And before leaving the flat, she would never fail to put it out. There was not more than a tiny wave of warmth, and a door opening and closing again was enough to displace it or even to dispel it altogether.

A piece of paper rustled on the floor when she came in and she picked up a letter.

“Mademoiselle,

I am most distressed at breaking my word to you again—in part at least. I have been twice today to the paper where I am owed money but the cashier was away. I, was faithfully promised he would be back tomorrow. If not, and if these people are really making a fool of me, I shall take other steps.

Please do not think there is any bad faith on my part. As witness of my good intentions, I enclose something on account, though you will probably think it far too little.

I am writing you this note because we have to dine with friends at the other end of Paris, and we shall be back very late—perhaps we shall not be back tonight at all. So don't worry about us.

*Yours sincerely,
Albert Caille.”*

It was the 20th of the month. The Cailles had not yet paid their rent. The suitcase had once more left the house, not to fetch Lina's winter coat—she always went out in her costume—but to take away some of the linen from her trousseau. They had gone to sell it to the Jews in the Rue des Blancs-Manteaux.

They owed money at Audebal's and at other shops in the neighbourhood, particularly the delicatessen, for they scarcely ever went to a restaurant now, but would stealthily bring a little food up to their room, though there was still no gas-ring there.

When they were alone together, they did not worry. But Albert Caille avoided meeting Dominique, and twice he had sent Lina to her to ask for more time.

Dominique was poorer than they were, for she would be poor always. Tonight she would not eat dinner, for her tea at the café in the Champs Elysées—she had not been able to resist the temptation of a cake on her table—represented more than the cost of one of her usual meals. She would make do with a little warmed-up coffee.

The Cailles had gone to the Rue Mont-Cenis, right at the top of the Butte, in Montmartre, where they now had friends. They made a gathering of ten or a dozen in a studio at the bottom of a courtyard. The women clubbed together and went off to buy cold meat, while the men arranged among themselves to bring wine or spirits. And in a purposely dim light they would wallow on a broken-down divan, stretch out on the floor on cushions or a rug, and argue while the rain, with a desperately slow rhythm, fell on Paris.

Monsieur Rouet got out of a taxi, paid the driver and gave him twenty-five centimes by way of tip. Despite the

rain, he had come almost the whole way on foot, under his umbrella, with regular steps; and it was only at the bottom of the Faubourg Saint Honoré that he had hailed a cab.

One half only of the double door of the block was open. The light in the hall was yellow; panelling lined the walls to the height of a man; a dark carpet, ribbed with brass rods, covered the stairs. The lift was still at the fifth floor: the fifth-floor tenants always failed to send it down again. He must get the concierge to bring it to their attention once and for all. After all he owned the building. He waited, took his place in the narrow cage and pushed the third button.

The bell rang far away in the flat. Cécile opened the door, took his hat and his wet umbrella and helped him out of his black overcoat, and a few minutes later the three of them were seated at the table in the heavy dining-room under the unchanging light of the lamp.

Their surroundings seemed eternal. The furniture and ornaments gave an appearance of having always existed and of pursuing their solemn life without heed of the three beings wielding spoon and fork, or of Cécile gliding noiselessly about in her felt slippers.

Then, when the second course was being served and only sighs were to be heard, Antoinette had a fit of absence. As she raised her head, as she perceived the two aged faces on her left and right, her eyes expressed a terrified stupor. It was as if she were seeing for the first time the world by which she was surrounded. She was like someone waking in an unknown house. These two beings, albeit so familiar, who hemmed her in like gaolers—she did not know them, they were nothing to her, no

bond linked them to her, she had no reason for being there, for breathing the same air as these two worn-out bosoms or for sharing their threatening silence.

From time to time Madame Rouet would look at her, and her look was never indifferent, her lightest word always had a meaning.

"Are you ill?"

"I don't feel very well. I have been to my mother's. I decided to go up the Rue Caulaincourt on foot. There was a gusty wind. Perhaps I've caught a chill."

Madame Rouet must know that she had been crying: her eyelids were still burning and sore.

"Did you go to the cemetery?"

She did not understand at once. To the cem . . .

"No . . . Not today . . . It was when I got to my mother's that I felt done up and began to shiver . . ."

Her eyes were filling. She could have cried, there, at the dinner-table, if she had not made an effort and yet just then her crying would have been without cause, for she was not thinking of the man who had not come. She was just generally unhappy, for every reason and for none.

"You must take a hot drink and a couple of aspirins before you go to bed."

Anyone examining the walls could have read there the whole history of the Rouet family. He would have found, among others, a photograph of Madame Rouet as a girl, dressed for tennis, racquet in hand; and, oddly enough, she was slender—really a girl.

Further along, in a black frame, was Monsieur Rouet's engineering diploma and, by way of pendant to it, his father-in-law's factory at the time when he had entered it at twenty-four years of age.

He had worn his hair *en'brosse* and very correct clothes with no style, such as he was to wear all his life—the clothes of a man who works, for whom every hour is dedicated to work.

Had any other man worked as hard as he had?

A photograph of the wedding. At twenty-eight the engineer had married his boss's daughter. Everyone was serious and imbued with a tranquil happiness, with a dignity which nothing could touch, as in a pious story. The workers had sent a delegation. They had been given a banquet in one of the shops of the factory.

It was still only a small factory. The big one, the one which Rouet had sold out some years since for a hundred millions—it was he who had created it, who had carried the whole burden on his shoulders day by day, minute by minute. Yet in his eyes, as in hers, had not his wife always remained his boss's daughter?

"Did you leave the office this afternoon, Germain?"

It was a man of sixty-six that she had before her. He had remained as tall, as broad, as upright as ever. His hair, though it had turned white, had remained as wiry. Yet he had given a start. He hesitated before giving an answer. He knew that every one of his wife's words had a meaning.

"I had so much to do that I don't remember now . . . Wait a minute . . . There was a moment when Bronstein . . . No . . . I don't think I left the office . . . Why do you ask?"

"Because I telephoned at five o'clock and you weren't there."

"You're quite right . . . At five o'clock I saw a client, Monsieur Michel, to the corner of the street . . . I wanted to say a few words to him out of Bronstein's hearing . . ."

Perhaps she believed him, perhaps not. More probably not. Very soon, after letting him go to bed first, she would search his wallet and count the notes in it.

He displayed not the slightest ill temper but went on eating calmly and serenely. It had lasted such a long time! He had never rebelled, he never would rebel. His body was like a husk which people think has nothing in it, because he had accustomed himself to keep everything bottled up inside. Anyway, even inside there was no rebellion now, scarcely even bitterness. He had worked so very, very hard. He had worked so hard that the mass of work, the mountain of human labour at his back, bore him down, frightening him like the eiderdown which in a nightmare threatens to fill the whole room.

He had had a son. Probably, surely, the son of his body, but he had never felt there was anything in common between them. He had vaguely watched the boy grow without being able to take any interest in this formless and sickly being. He had put him into one office, then another. Then, since he had sold out his business and the doctor ordered rest, he had placed his son, like an ornament, with a suitable title, in a business in which he had an interest, a business to do with safes.

The light modelled each of the three faces differently, the three beings ate and breathed, Cécile watched maliciously from the door for the moment to change the plates and you might have thought that she hated all three equally.

In a bar in the Champs Elysées there was doubtless a tall man, faultlessly dressed and pale-faced, drinking cocktails while he looked through the racing papers, scarcely remembering the Rue Montaigne.

Young men and women with the whole of life before them drank and grew excited in the half-darkness of the studio in the Rue du Mont-Cenis, and Dominique, close to the log whose tiny flame kept her company, reached mechanically for the stocking basket. With bent head she threaded her wool and slipped the egg of varnished wood into a grey stocking whose foot was already so darned that now she was darning nothing but old darns. She was not hungry. She had trained herself not to be hungry. We are assured that the stomach grows habituated and becomes quite small. She must have a minute stomach, for next to nothing was enough for her.

Silence rose from the black and shining street; it oozed from the houses, from the windows with drawn curtains behind which people were breathing; silence dripped off the walls; and the rain too was silent, its unvarying patter was a form of silence, for it rendered the void more palpable.

It had been raining like that, only the rain was more continuous and hard, with sudden gusts which did their best to blow umbrellas inside out, when one evening she had chanced to go along the Rue Coquillière, close to the markets, where she had been to buy buttons to match an old dress she had had dyed. On the sides of the gaping doorways were rows of brass or enamel plates, with many names and professions and businesses such as are never heard of. Everywhere there were dark and rickety staircases, there were fruit-baskets in the shelter of carriage-entrances and a swarming blackness that smelt of the oil in which a chip-seller, in the full blast of the wind, was frying her potatoes.

From one of these doorways Dominique had seen

Monsieur Rouet emerge. She had never suspected that this was the sort of place he went off to each morning with his dignified and measured step, like a clerk going to his office. How did he set about crossing the slimy streets without dirtying his always spotless shoes? It was his form of dandyism. From time to time he would look down to make sure there was no splash of mud to make a little star on the gleaming black of the patent leather.

"Société Prima

Articles de Paris

Staircase B—Entresol—End of the corridor on the left"

On the pallid enamel plate a black hand pointed the way.

On the entresol, in grey rooms with splintered floors, where one's head brushed against the ceiling and the paper mouldered on the walls, there were goods in every corner—cases, bales, cardboard boxes, blue and green combs, powder-boxes in bakelite, things shiny, nickelled, varnished, vulgar, badly made, such as are sold in bazaars and at fairs. A fifty-year-old woman in a black smock sorted them from morning till night and received clients. One door was always shut. It was knocked on only in fear and trembling, and behind it, at a yellow desk and with a huge safe at his back, sat Monsieur Brönstein, his skull naked and gleaming, with a single lock of black hair which seemed to have been drawn on with Indian ink.

On the left side of the office there was a single arm-chair, worn but comfortable, and behind the chair were a washhand basin, a scrap of soap and a red-bordered towel with a barrack-room smell.

It was here, in this armchair, that Monsieur Rouet came to settle himself after crossing without a look the rooms cluttered with shoddy goods.

"Nobody here?"

For, if there was a client with Monsieur Bronstein, he would slip into a little lumber-room where he would wait standing, as one waits behind a door or screen in houses of resort where the clients never meet one another.

The Société Prima was his business. This was what he had invested his millions in, and Bronstein made them fructify. The *articles de Paris* were a façade, the true activity of the house residing entirely in the huge, indecent safe, crammed with bills, I.O.U.s and queer contracts.

It was here, facing the Polish Jew, that small business men in difficulties, skilled workmen, embarrassed manufacturers, came to their doom. They would enter with a constrained smile, determined to bluff and lie, and a few minutes later they had vomited the whole dirty truth—they were nothing now but men in desperate straits, who could have been made to kneel down before the safe with its door deliberately left ajar.

When it was not raining, Monsieur Rouet would sometimes, for his health, traverse the distance between the Rue Goquillière and the Faubourg Saint Honoré at his usual even pace, skirting a turbulent sea of life; and some who saw him going by, always at the same hour, admired him for a spry old gentleman.

Dominique, without wanting to, had followed him elsewhere on more troublous wanderings. She had seen him, camouflaged under his umbrella, slipping with hunched shoulders into the alleys in the neighbourhood of the

markets. She had seen him walk with a different step, irregular and jerky, and hurry towards a distant silhouette under a gas-jet, slacken pace, then turn round to make off afresh. She had not at once understood the meaning of this chase. She had been oppressed by the chaotic perspectives of the streets, the black and icy doorways, the staircases giving direct on to the roadway, the frosted globes over the doors of terrifying hotels and the shadows, still or fleeting, in the windows of little bars where beings awaited God knows what, immobile as waxworks.

The man of the wire factory, the man of the Faubourg Saint Honoré, of the table set in the unchanging dining-room, still went on, driven by an implacable force. His walk became that of an old man and he brushed past girls as they came out of the shadows to accost him. Their faces, as though magnetically attracted, loomed up for a moment in the uncertain light, and then he would set off again, weighed down and anxious, gnawing at his fever, hovering between hope and despair.

Dominique had understood. At the corner of an alley she had seen him stop near a thin little girl with no hat and wearing a sorry green coat cloak-fashion over her shoulders. She was walking along, more furtively than the others, no doubt because she was under age, on long spindly legs. She had looked up with a shake of her damp hair, as if to give him a better chance to look her over, and he had followed a few paces behind, just as Antoinette, in the Rue Montaigne, had followed the Italian. He had plunged in her wake into one of those doorless openings at the end of which his feet had stumbled on the treads of a staircase. A light had gleamed, and Dominique had fled in terror, and had wandered around for a long

time in her anguished fear of not being able to escape from this dreadful labyrinth.

They were eating the sweet, all three of them, under the lamp. Each was thinking his own thoughts, following their simple or complicated thread; only Madame Rouet looked at the others, as if she alone bore the burden of their lives and of the life of the house.

On the wall in front of her hung a portrait of her son at five or six years old with a straw hat on his head and a hoop in his hands. Was she the only one who had failed to realise even then that he was not an ordinary boy but a spoilt sample—a hazy, inconsistent creature? Then there was the other photograph of him as a young man, trying to put on a bold face and look straight ahead. But was it not clear from this that he would never achieve a normal life, and that nothing would drag him out of his incurable melancholia?

The only relic he had left in the house was Antoinette, the stranger with whom there was no point of contact and who, now that her husband was dead, sat at their table instead of continuing her own kind of life with her mother in the Rue Caulaincourt or some such place.

From outside all this came to nothing more than curtains with a faint light throbbing behind them. In the dining-room, in the very heart of the Rouet family, the whole of life was concentrated in the old lady's terribly clear-sighted eyes, resting passionless and loveless on the others' faces—whether on the false serenity of her husband's face, or on that of her daughter-in-law with the blood coursing just beneath the skin.

She knew it all. She it was who had dictated the marriage settlement. She it was again who, from the very

first years, had created the life of the family, had channelled it and banked it in. She it was still who had prevented her son from having a life of his own; who had wanted him to remain a child all his life, even in his work, in which he was no more than a clerk at the factory.

She it was who, since she could not prevent his marriage, had attached the second household to her own; and, it was because of her that the young couple had had nothing in their own right, but depended entirely on their monthly allowance and such odd sums as she doled out to them.

A cold smile played on her lips when her eyes fell momentarily on Antoinette's shoulders, on that young, ardent flesh quivering with the urge to escape.

Antoinette owned nothing except her furniture. Before she had any money under her own control, she would have to wait till her parents-in-law were dead; and even then she would enjoy only the interest on the fortune, which at her death would revert to distant Rouet relatives, or more likely to some of the Leprons.

That was as it should be. That was why Antoinette stayed on in the house, why she had gone to Trouville, why again, for fear of being poor, she went upstairs to eat her meals with them and why, for hours at a time, she kept her mother-in-law company.

"You've scarcely eaten a thing."

"I'm not hungry. I'm sorry."

Antoinette was afraid she would not reach the end of dinner without letting her nerves break out. She would have liked to shriek, to bite, to cry out her hurt, to call the man who had not come, like a creature of the woods tragically calling its mate.

"You look as though you've been crying."

And Cécile at the door feasted on each fresh thrust.

"Mother and I talked about depressing things."

"About Hubert, was it?"

Antoinette was so far away that involuntarily she raised her eyes in astonishment.

Hubert? She remembered so little of him. She could scarcely have called up his face with her eyes shut. He was dead, quite dead. There was nothing left of him but a confused picture, an impression of sadness, or rather of a dreary existence dragging on and threatening to last for ever.

"One day when it's not raining, we'll go and visit the grave together. Won't we, Antoinette?"

"Yes, Mama."

She was not sure that she had spoken. Her voice had passed into the air like someone else's. She felt she must get up and release the tension.

"I beg your pardon . . ."

She saw the two sitting opposite each other. She did her best to convince herself that it was she—Antoinette—who was there. She repeated:

"I beg your pardon . . ."

She fled. She had a mad longing to go out into the damp night, to scour the Champs Elysées, to hunt for him in every bar, to cry out to him that it was impossible, that he could not abandon her, that she would do anything, that she would take up hardly any room, scarcely so much as a servant, if only he . . .

"Cécile! Go downstairs with Madame Antoinette. I think she's not very well."

Then Monsieur Rouet said, as he hunted in his pocket for a toothpick:

"What's the matter with her?"

"You wouldn't understand."

The truth was, she did not herself know yet, but she would find out, she was sure. Her sole object in life was to find out everything that went on around her in the circle which she dominated.

"Being alone is doing her no good. It's odd that she hasn't a single woman friend."

How like a man to talk like that! Words, words! Did the Rouets have friends? They did not even see the more or less close relatives whom they had left scattered along their path and who used to write humbly to them at the new year because they were rich.

Women friends—what for? Was it likely that Madame Rouet would allow strangers, men or women, to invade her house?

True, one had had to be admitted, Antoinette herself, because her son had wanted her, cost what it might, because, feeble as he was, he was capable of letting it make him ill.

"You shall have your wife!"

He had got her. He found out what it meant. He had soon tired of following wherever she hurried, driven by her need to keep moving and to circle round the bright lights.

"Admit you're not happy."

"But I am, Mama!"

Then why had he started collecting stamps, and then begun learning Spanish all by himself for whole evenings at a time?

Now Antoinette was going quietly. Madame Rouet had broken her in. •

"Tell Madame Antoinette to come up."

She came up.

"Antoinette, hand me the blue thread. Not that one. The navy blue. Now thread my needle . . ."

She quivered, she trembled with impatience, but she obeyed. She stayed there for hours together under the shadow of her mother-in-law.

"Hm! You've been crying! Hm! You weren't hungry . . ."

If only she had been able to walk like other people! What a paradox it was to have a brain so keenly alive, a mind so agile and clear, a will so fierce, and to have to drag about a pair of legs that were slowly turning into pillars of stone!

She struggled. When she was alone, when no one could take her unawares, she would get up unaided at the price of painful efforts, and would force herself to walk round the room, deliberately dispensing with her stick, counting the steps. She *would* manage somehow, she *would* get the mastery over these accursed legs, but nobody need know.

It was not to the Rue Caulaincourt that Antoinette had gone to revel in sad thoughts. Madame Rouet's lips pushed forward in a contemptuous sneer. She knew them—the sort of people whose only desires were trivial and whose only thoughts were how to satisfy them.

Antoinette's mother was of that kind. It was certain that her daughter slipped money to her on the sly, and that each note was converted into an immediate pleasure—a lobster, a dinner at a restaurant, a visit to the cinema, neighbouring wives asked in for coffee and cakes or some fearful dress she bought herself after spending a whole day doing the round of the big stores.

"My daughter who married the Rouets' son . . . The Rouet wire factories, you know . . . People with a hundred million of their own, yet they live like the most ordinary folk . . . when she got married, they hadn't even got a car! . . . It was she who . . ."

She was almost equally proud of her other daughter Colette, who was kept by a brewer from the North. She would visit her in her flat in Passy, hiding in the kitchen when the fifty-year-old brewer turned up unexpectedly. Perhaps she listened—she was certainly capable of listening unashamedly—to the noises they made in the bedroom or the bathroom.

"Hand me my glasses, Félicie. Hasn't Cécile come upstairs?"

A voice from the hall.

"Here I am, madame."

"What is she doing?"

"At first she wouldn't let me turn down the bed. She told me to go away. She shouted:

"Please leave me alone! Can't you see that . . ."

And Madame Rouet's unchanging voice:

"Then what?"

"Nothing. She didn't finish. She shut herself up in the bathroom. I did the bed. When I left, she was crying. You could hear her through the door from a dozen yards away."

"Hand me my glasses."

At midnight Antoinette's mother came out of a cinema in the Place Blanche with a neighbour from the same floor whom she had treated to her seat. There were still the temptations of the brightly-lit brasseries, of a little extra pleasure.

"Suppose we stood ourselves a liqueur at Graff's?"

Motionless in his bed, Monsieur Rouet waited for sleep, waited for nothing else: he had long since accepted the bounds of his life.

Dominique was darning grey stockings. All the stockings in the basket were grey. She never wore any other kind; they showed the dirt least. She was convinced that they were the strongest and that they went with any frock.

From time to time she would raise her head, making out the white pearls on the window-panes, a touch of diffused pink behind the windows opposite and nothing but black on the floor above. Then she would bend over her work again, reaching out to give a gentle turn to the log in order to keep the yellow flame alive.

She was the last in the street to go to bed. The Cailles had not come home. She waited on for them a little in silence, went to sleep, rose before dawn and watched the window-panes grow pale, but the couple did not get back till seven in the morning, after trailing round the markets among the damp vegetables and the vagrants sheltering in the doorways.

Both had drawn faces, particularly Albert Caille, who had had too much to drink. For fear of meeting their landlady, they turned the key in the lock noiselessly and crossed the drawing-room on tiptoe.

Lina asked in a tired voice:

"What do we do now?"

"First of all we're going to sleep."

They did not make love when they went to bed, but only towards midday when they were only half-awake, and then they went to sleep again. It was two o'clock when the sound of water was heard in the bathroom.

Antoinette had gone out at ten in the morning and had not reappeared in the Faubourg Saint Honoré, but she must have telephoned. Towards noon Madame Rouet had gone to the telephone and only two places had been laid for lunch.

Now Monsieur Rouet, punctual as ever, was leaving the house and making his way to the Rue Coquillière.

III

The train. As it left the station, puffing its smoke between the swaying lines of houses, crusts of snow could still be seen in sheltered corners on the black of the embankments, for night had not yet quite fallen.

The last time, in August, it had been Antoinette who went off, leaving Dominique alone in Paris for long, weary weeks. Today, it was Dominique who was in the train, still standing for a moment in the corridor before entering her third-class compartment.

She had only just received the telegram: "*Aunt Clémentine passed away. Funeral Wednesday. François.*" She did not understand, for today was Tuesday. The death must have occurred on Sunday, since the burial usually takes place three days after the death. Unless it had been a particularly contagious illness? But Aunt Clémentine had not died of a contagious illness. She must be . . . let's see . . . seventy-four and seven . . . eighty-one . . . the weather was not warm. Even at Toulon it was not warm in January, and there was no need to hurry the interment.

Which François? The father, François de Chaillou, who would have been at Rennes, or wasn't it more probably his son who had joined the navy? The son, without a doubt, That made more sense. Aunt Clémentine had lived alone with a domestic even older than herself in her villa at La Seyne-sur-Mer near the level-crossing, where Dominique had sometimes spent her holidays. If she had been ill for a long time, some member of the family would have gone to her and would have written to Dominique. It must have been very sudden. François had been informed as being the nearest. It was François who had sent out the telegrams and he must have forgotten his cousin. Yes, that was how things had gone. She was always being forgotten. She counted so little!

Antoinette would perhaps not notice her departure! She would see closed shutters for three or four days, without wondering what had happened to her neighbour. The Cailles were being left alone in the flat. It was to be hoped they would not take advantage of the fact to invite their friends from the Rue du Mont-Cenis, and spend the entire night drinking with them and making merry in the drawing-room!

The compartment was full. Dominique had a corner-seat next to the window. Beside her was a sailor on leave and there was another opposite. Without enthusiasm they exchanged allusions to their stay in Paris, winks, then occasional words about messmates they would soon be seeing again. It was clear that, like brothers, they had no reserves between them. They were sleepy and soon dropped off, their berets over their eyes. The one next to Dominique nudged her from time to time, leaning against her with all his weight on the curves.

For a long time she thought, looking at the sailor opposite and then at a woman who was feeding her baby and whose great white breast made her feel sick. A railway clerk read a cheap novel. The noise of the train gradually penetrated her head and its rhythm overlaid that of her breathing and the beating of her heart. She let herself go. An icy draught from the window played on the nape of her neck. Her feet were on the metal plate which served as heating apparatus, giving off steam. She closed her eyes, then opened them again. Someone turned the electric switch and then there was only a blue glimmer. It was warm, but the draught still played like a thin jet of cold water. Dominique's eyelids pricked. The train stopped, people moved about in the obscurity of a station, lights glided by and the train was in motion again. They must have travelled a long way, past Dijon, when she realised that someone was in pursuit of the train in the pale light of the haloed moon.

She was not astonished. She simply said:

"Why! Mademoiselle Augustine . . ."

And she gave a gentle, sad smile, such as people exchange who know each other's misfortunes. She understood, all of a sudden. It was a full week since she had seen Mademoiselle Augustine at her window, but two or three times she had caught a glimpse of the concierge up in the attic.

The old spinster was dead, like Aunt Clémentine. She was so happy to be dead, and she was running after the train. Finally she reached Dominique's compartment, and sat down beside her, a little out of breath, smiling and delighted, though with a touch of embarrassment, for she was not a pushful sort of person.

It was odd to see her thus, milky and almost luminous,

so attractive, so beautiful—for she was beautiful, and yet she could be recognised!

She stammered, deliciously bashful:

"I nearly missed you. I went to your flat as quickly as I could. The thing was still warm on my bed. I had always promised to keep my first visit for you, but you had just left and I rushed to the Gare de Lyon . . ."

Her breasts, which must formerly have been like jelly fish, stood firmly up.

"I'm so happy! Only, you understand, I haven't got the way of it yet. The concierge is up there laying it out, she thoroughly enjoys washing a dead woman and messing her about . . ."

Dominique could very well picture the concierge, a skinny woman slowly dying of chest-trouble, who laid out all the corpses in the neighbourhood.

"She went knocking on the doors, shouting:

" 'She's dead! Mademoiselle Augustine is dead!'

"And I, I left on tiptoe . . . I've been waiting so long! I thought it would never come! In the end I was suffocating. I was too hot in that great body. Did you notice that I perspired a lot and that my perspiration had a strong smell? I used to look at you from a distance. I knew you were looking at me too. You were saying to yourself:

" 'Look! Old Augustine is at her window . . .'

"And I wanted so badly to fly across to you and tell you everything! . . . But you wouldn't have understood . . . Now, it's all over . . . I am at peace . . . I'm going to keep you company to the end of the journey . . ."

Then Dominique felt a hand, endowed with unearthly warmth and life, clasping hers. She was as much moved as at the first touch of a lover's hand. She felt a little

shame. She too had not the way of it, and she turned her head away with a blush.

"Admit it," stammered Mademoiselle Augustine, "I was a hideous old maid . . ."

Dominique wanted to say no, out of politeness, but she realised that it was impossible from now on to lie to her.

"Yes! Yes! . . . It distressed me, I can tell you! . . . I was so glad when I finally caught my pneumonia! . . . They cupped me, and I had to let them do it to me . . . There were moments when I thought they were going to keep me, but I took advantage of an hour when they had left me alone . . .

"I love you so much!"

Dominique was not shocked. This love was not ridiculous. It seemed to her to be quite natural, to be what she had always been waiting for.

Her only embarrassment was on account of the two sailors. She wanted to tell Mademoiselle Augustine about them; perhaps she had not seen them. But her will was growing numb and a supernatural lassitude was taking hold of her. She was warm to the very depths of her flesh, her veins, her bones. An arm twined round her, lips drew close to hers, she closed her eyes, panting. A unique sensation stiffened her whole being, she was afraid, she was sinking, she . . .

★

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★

Dominique never knew whether she had really moaned. In the pale blue half-darkness of the compartment she saw nothing but the eyes of the sailor opposite staring at her. Perhaps he had just woken up? Or had he been floating thus between waking and sleeping for a long time?

She was uneasy again. 'She was ashamed. Something had almost happened within her and then stopped short—something which filled her with foreboding, which frightened her, to which she dared not give a name.

She did not sleep for the rest of the night. With the first glimmerings of dawn, when they had just passed Montélimar, she stood in the corridor, her face motionless against a window, watching the first olive trees go by, the red, almost flat, roofs and the white houses.

The sun was shining at Saint Charles, and she went to the station buffet for a cup of coffee and a croissant, keeping an eye all the time on her train.

Further on she caught glimpses of the sea. It was very blue, with an infinity of white crests, for the mistral was blowing. The sky was clear and on the road people could be seen holding their hats on.

At Toulon she took the tram. Despite her shame she had not yet succeeded in altogether dispelling the extraordinary sensation that still lingered in the most secret recesses of her being.

It had happened to her just once before a long time ago, when she was sixteen or seventeen: but then the sensation had opened out like a rocket in the deep blue of the sky, leaving her dazed and hollow.

Why! In an open taxi she recognised her cousin Bernard with a girl she had never seen. She made signs to them. Bernard turned round too late, and the tram was already far behind.

"My poor Nique! How tired you must be. Go upstairs for a minute and freshen yourself."

The burial was to take place in an hour's time. The house was full of uncles, aunts and cousins. They all kissed her.

"You're always the same!" they said. "What time did you get François' telegram? Just imagine, he hadn't your address, so you've arrived too late to see *her* for the last time. We couldn't wait too long, you understand . . ."

Then, in a whisper: "She was beginning to smell . . ."

"Her legs had swollen lately . . . Oh, no . . . She wasn't altered . . . If Dominique had been able to see her . . . She looked as if she was asleep. . . . Did she remember? . . . The little Cottion boy one day said in his childish way that Aunt Clémentine tasted of preserved fruit . . . Ah well! she stayed like that right to the end . . . But . . ."

"Go and wash . . . You'll hear everything soon . . . You'll be properly surprised! . . . Have you seen poor old Uncle François? . . . He *would* come, all the same . . . Oh dear! We're very much afraid that it'll be his turn one of these days, and that we shall all be meeting again soon at Rennes . . ."

There were a great many people at the funeral, a great many uniforms. The women's veils floated out. They had gone over the level-crossing before Dominique had barely recognised it. Everything seemed smaller to her, the villa too, and so commonplace!

Several times during the service she thought of Antoinette, seeing her again at another funeral at Saint-Philippe-du-Roule, then, as they left the cemetery, she found herself once more thronged by the entire family. Her uncles and aunts had become old people.

"*You* haven't changed!"

They had. So had her cousins—mature persons now, married and with children.

She had been introduced to a boy of thirteen, who had said:

"How d'you do, aunt."

"It's Jean's son."

What she was most astonished to rediscover was the vocabulary of long ago—those words that were meaningless outside the family, the clan. Sometimes she had to make an effort to understand.

Two big tables had been set in the dining-room and drawing-room of the villa. All the children had been put at one table. Beside her there was a Polytechnic student in uniform. He had a bass voice and continually addressed her as "little aunt."

"The maths. beak is a wizard type . . ."

"I'm doing lang. and lit. . . ."

The same fetish-words, uttered by creatures she had known as babies, or of whose existence she knew only from new-year letters.

"Berthe Babarit, who married an officer in the Engineers last year, has just had a baby . . ."

She watched them. She felt that they were covertly watching her too; and it embarrassed her. She would have liked to be like them, to feel once more that she belonged to the clan. They were unworried, were meeting as though they had never parted. Some, who lived in the same town and often met, alluded to common friends, to details of careers and to holidays spent at the seaside together.

"Don't you feel too much alone in Paris, Nique? I've always wondered why you stayed in that big city, when . . ."

"I'm quite happy."

Nique hasn't changed! Nique hasn't changed! They repeated it to her as if she alone of the whole family had

always been the same age, forty, as if she had always been an old maid.

Yes, they had expected her not to marry and they found it quite natural. Nobody referred to the possibility of another kind of life.

"I wonder how Aunt Clémentine could do such a thing . . . If she had been in need, that would at least have been an excuse! . . . But she was drawing a pension . . . She had everything she needed . . ."

"She who was so affectionate and loved children so! . . ."

An aunt cut in:

"One only really loves children when one has one's own. Anything beyond, believe me, is just affectation . . ."

Aunt Clémentine's real victim was Dominique, who said nothing, doing her best to maintain the slightly mournful smile that she got from her family, that she had always seen on her mother's and her aunts' faces.

There had been only one person from whom she had a chance of eventually inheriting anything—Aunt Clémentine—and now they told her that Aunt Clémentine without a word to a soul had put all her property into an annuity.

There was nothing left to share out except some personal ornaments, a little box of old jewels and some knick-knacks, for the furniture had been willed to the old domestic Emma, whom they had tried to get to sit down at table but who had insisted on remaining on her own in the kitchen.

"What would you like to have as a souvenir, Nique? I was saying to Uncle François that the cameo would please you. It's a bit old-fashioned, but it's very beautiful. Aunt Clémentine wore it right up to the end."

The share-out began at four o'clock.

The children had been sent out into the garden. Certain groups were going back by train the same day.

There was a debate over the two wedding-rings, for Aunt Clémentine, who had been a widow, had worn two. They had been removed from her body after death and there were some who said that was wrong.

"Suppose we give the earrings to Céline and the watch to Jean . . ."

The men talked shop. Those belonging to the army or the government service discussed the merits of posts in the colonies.

" . . . Fortunately we have a very good high school. I don't want to be promoted for at least three years, until the children have passed matric—it's always a bad thing changing teachers . . ."

"Nique! The cameo? Really and truly? . . ."

And she murmured automatically, because it was what she was expected to say:

"It's too much!"

"Oh no! Come on! You'd better take this photograph as well with yourself in the garden with Aunt Clémentine and her husband . . ."

A shed had since been put up opposite, so that only a tiny bit of the sea was visible now.

"Why shouldn't you come and spend a few days with us at Saint Malo? It would give you a change . . ."

Did they perceive that she needed a change? No! These were the words they spoke every time they met. Invitations were issued and then never referred to again.

"When do you go back?"

"Tomorrow."

"You've booked a room at an hotel? Here, you understand . . . We could all have dinner together this evening in a restaurant . . . François. Where could we have dinner—not too expensive?"

They kissed again. Occasionally Dominique felt that contact was on the point of being made and that she would once more be part of the clan. Her uneasiness turned into anguish. All these faces revolved about her, running into one another, standing out suddenly with a stupefying clarity, and she said to herself:

"It's So-and-so!"

She was too exhausted to go back by the night train, and she managed with some difficulty to find a room in a tiny hotel pervaded by an indefinably hostile smell, which prevented her from sleeping practically all night.

She left by the morning train, making off stealthily with the cameo in her handbag. A slanting sun came into the compartment in which, for many long hours, there was a noisy coming and going of passengers getting in only for short journeys. On the outskirts of Lyons the sky became white, then turned grey and the first flakes of snow were to be seen above Chalon-sur-Saône. Dominique ate some sandwiches she had bought at the station and the whole way to Paris existed as though in a tunnel, her eyes half closed, her features drawn and etched deep by fatigue and the feeling of emptiness, of uselessness, she had brought away from Toulon.

When she reached the Faubourg Saint Honoré, she was vexed to find no one in. The Cailles had gone out. Perhaps they would not come back until the small hours? The room was cold, with no smell. She lit a log before she took off her coat, and held a match over the gas-ring.

The shutters in front of old Augustine's window were closed. So she really was dead, for she never used to close her shutters.

No light in Antoinette's flat. It was ten o'clock in the evening. Had Dominique really got to believe that she had already gone to bed? No! She could sense an emptiness behind the curtained windows.

Only on the floor above did a little light come through, yellow light that moved from the dining-room to the bedroom and towards eleven o'clock went out altogether. Antoinette was not with her parents-in-law either.

Dominique made her bed, unpacked her luggage carefully, gazed at the cameo before shutting it up in the drawer in which she kept her souvenirs, and never stopped watching the street, cross and irritated that Antoinette should have taken advantage of her absence to begin a new life.

It was January now. For more than a month nothing had happened. Once, twice a week Antoinette had gone to visit her mother in the Rue Caulaincourt. One day, about five o'clock, the two women had gone out together to the cinema and then they had met Colette in a café on one of the big boulevards.

For two weeks more Antoinette had furtively gone into the little bar in the Rue Montaigne. She did not expect anything any more. She was well aware that it was futile and merely looked in and went out again.

"Nothing for me?"

"Nothing, Madame."

She had grown thin and pale and was once more spending hours reading, stretched out on her bed and smoking cigarettes.

Several times her eye had caught Dominique's, and this was not the hasty glance one bestows on a passer-by: her eyes were insistent. Antoinette knew that Dominique knew everything and there was a question in her wide-open pupils:

"Why?"

She could not understand. Yet it was not mere curiosity that she divined in this unknown woman who followed so closely on her track.

Sometimes it was as though a sort of affection, of trust even, was about to spring up.

"You who know everything . . ."

But they did not become acquainted. They went on passing. Each went her own way, carrying her own thoughts with her.

Antoinette was not ill and she had not gone to bed, but it did not occur to Dominique that she could simply have gone to the cinema.

No! At this time of night people were coming out of the cinemas. People could be heard coming home; taxis tore along at full speed; the last buses lumbered along the streets; flakes of snow fell slowly and on the spot where they came to rest on the cold stones there was nothing left a few seconds later, not even a spot of damp.

Ten times Dominique gazed at the closed shutters of Augustine's attic, and each time she was overwhelmed with shame. She could not understand how she could have had such a dream, and yet she knew it was not a product of chance. She did not want to think of it, yet she was tempted to decipher its deep meaning.

Was she another Augustine? The villa at Toulon came to her mind's eye again. The relatives she had known as

uncles and aunts had grown old or were dead. Those she had known as children were now parents in their turn—the girls were mothers, the wild schoolboys were engineers or magistrates, the babies talked of maths. or lang. and lit., of books and matric and called her Aunt Dominique.

“You haven’t changed, Nique!”

They said it in all sincerity. Because her life had not changed. Because nothing in particular had happened to her.

Old Augustine was dead. Tomorrow or the day after she would be buried, as Aunt Clémentine had been buried.

Then there would be no old maid left in the street—or rather it would be Dominique’s turn.

She was floundering. She went to look at herself in the mirror. It wasn’t true that she was old! It wasn’t true that all was already over with her. Her flesh had not withered. Her skin had remained white and soft. Under her eyelids there might be a tiny line, a fairly deep one, but it could scarcely be seen, it was a question of temperament and health—as a girl she had been ordered tonics and given injections.

As for her body, which she alone knew, it was that of a girl and without blemish.

Why did Antoinette not come home? The last bus had gone by and it was past the time for the last underground train.

It was treachery to take advantage of Dominique’s absence to begin a new life, the more so that that absence had been involuntary, that Dominique had only gone away against her will and in going had looked her excuses at the windows opposite.

The Cailles came in. They had seen a light under the door. They whispered, wondering whether they ought to go and greet her and report that all had gone well while she was away, that no one had called except the gas-man and they had not paid because . . .

Lina's voice:

"Perhaps she's undressed."

Then a silence. They were smiling at the idea of their landlady's undressing. Why? What right had they to smile? What did they know of her?

They moved about and made a noise, imagining that they were the only people in the world—they and their delight in sheer living, their thoughtlessness and the pleasures they allowed themselves without stint and without thought of the morrow.

They had paid their rent. But did they know whether they would be able to pay at the end of the month?

"Not tonight, Albert . . . You know we can't . . ."

Fancy a woman saying that to a man! . . .

A taxi . . . No, it was stopping further down the street. It was ten past one . . . The taxi-door banged . . . No steps were yet audible . . . Crouching in the corner of the window, Dominique managed to get a glimpse of the taxi, the driver placidly waiting, a woman on her feet, leaning over the door, another face against hers.

They kissed. The taxi went back in the direction of the Boulevard Haussmann. Antoinette walked quickly, hunting in her bag for the key, making for the middle of the roadway and looking up to make sure that there was no longer any light on at her parents'-in-law. It was clear that she was alive again. An atmosphere of joy and love wrapped her round like the fur coat in whose warmth she

was snuggling. She slipped into the corridor, hesitated at the lift and climbed the stairs on tiptoe.

In her own flat she lit only the bedside lamp with its pink radiance. No doubt she let her garments fall to her feet, just like that, and slipped between the sheets. Only a few minutes later the light was out. There was not a soul stirring in the neighbourhood and Dominique was as much alone as old Augustine, who had no one to watch over her motionless corpse.



The same feverish excitement, the same behaviour, the same stratagems, the same spurts of gaiety and the same docility towards Madame Rouet.

Antoinette, with new-found amiability towards her mother-in-law, would go up without having been summoned, would apply herself to trifling tasks, would anticipate the old people's wishes.

The only change was in the time. And the days. Did she still say that she was going to her mother's?

At half-past four she would go out, reining in her impatience while she walked as far as Saint-Philippe-du-Roule where she plunged into the first taxi.

"Place Blanche!"

It was another kind of mystery. The taxi did not get through the crowded streets fast enough, and a gloved hand would be on the door-handle even before it had stopped.

The floor of a vast dance-hall, vulgar gilding, mirrors, red hangings, a box-office. "Entrance: five francs."

An enormous room, tables beyond number, spotlights contrasting with the filtered illumination, and in this

unreal light a hundred, two hundred, couples slowly revolving, while outside, fifty yards away, the life of the city rolled and broke, with its cars, its buses, people carrying parcels, running God knows where, in pursuit of themselves.

An Antoinette transfigured, her mink coat streaming behind her, an Antoinette entering this new world as though it were the seventh heaven, walking straight to one corner of the room, her hand outstretched and the glove already off, another hand grasping it, a man half getting up, but only half, for she was already at his side and already too he was stroking her knee under the black silk.

"Here I am."

One orchestra succeeded another. The spotlights changed from yellow to violet. The couples, after hesitating for an instant, found their places again and began to revolve to a new rhythm, while other couples emerged from dark recesses at the side.

Thus at five o'clock each afternoon there were three hundred, perhaps five hundred, women there who had escaped from reality and were dancing. There were as many men, nearly all young, coolly waiting for them, keeping an eye on them, moving furtively and silently to and fro, smoking their cigarettes.

Antoinette touched up the red on her lips and the slightly yellowish pink on her cheeks. A look asked:

"Shall we dance?"

And the man slipped his arm under her fur into the warmth generated by her body, his hand resting on flesh rendered smoother by the silk of her dress—smoother and still more supple, more truly flesh than ever and even

more feminine. She smiled through half-parted lips and they were lost amidst the other couples, seeing nothing but themselves through their half-closed lids.

The man murmured like an incantation:

"Come . . ."

And Antoinette no doubt answered:

"One more . . ."

One more dance . . . To delay the moment of pleasure . . . To render desire more piercing . . . Perhaps to feel there, surrounded by other men and women, what Dominique had felt in the train . . .

"Come . . ."

"Wait a little longer . . ."

And their faces showed clearly that they had begun the act of love.

"Come . . ."

He carried her off. She resisted no longer.

"My bag . . ."

She had been on the point of forgetting it. She let herself be led, went through the heavy red velvet curtains, felt the coolness of the entrance on her cheeks and passed in front of the glass cage of a box office:

"Admission: five francs."

The cars and the buses, the lights and the crowd, a kind of river to ford or skirt, a street-corner to be taken on the wing and, immediately after a delicatessen shop, a threshold to cross, a black marble slab with gilt letters and a narrow corridor that smelt of washing.

That day Antoinette paused on the threshold. Her pupils dilated for a second. She had recognised a black silhouette, a pale face turned towards her, eyes devouring her, and then the lips had curled up in a triumphant, dis-

dainful smile—the smile of a woman letting herself be carried off on the masterful arm of the male.

The couple had sunk without trace . . .

There was nothing left but the beginning of a corridor, people passing the window of a delicatessen and the image of the man who had followed Antoinette up the stairs—a mulatto with insolent eyes.

IV

It happened on the 12th of February. Really Antoinette had been asking for it for several days, as Dominique had seen. It was not due merely to heedlessness or to bravado: borne up by her passion, carried away by a whirlwind, she hurried consciously to disaster.

However, it did not come through the concierge, nor consequently, through Monsieur Rouet, as Dominique had expected. Two days before she had caught the concierge, after some hesitation, stopping the landlord as he went by. It was beyond a doubt to tell him that a man was entering the building each evening and not leaving until very early next morning. The concierge knew whose flat the man went to. She had even been paid to keep quiet, for Antoinette had been stupid enough to stop outside the lodge and take a biggish note out of her bag.

“I’m sure you’ll be discreet, Madame Chochoi!”

However, to be sure of others’ discretion, one must first display one’s own and not let them think one is gaily careering to the abyss. Yet that was the impression that

Antoinette radiated. Her private smile, shining with joy, overflowing with an ambiguous happiness, was a provocation. Her laugh resembled the cries which love-making must wring from her and her sharp teeth were always in search of flesh to bite. Whatever her frock, her naked body, her gleaming flesh, could be sensed beneath it.

The concierge had been afraid for her place and, after consulting her husband, who was night watchman at a chocolate factory, she had informed Monsieur Rouet of what was going on.

He, to Dominique's astonishment, had passed nothing on to his wife, so that the new anonymous note—the third—had missed fire like the earlier ones.

"Take care!"

Sincerely, naïvely, she wanted to put Antoinette on her guard and to make her realise that danger hung over her. But Antoinette, as soon as she received the message, had deliberately opened the window although it was winter, had re-read the note ostentatiously, crumpled it into a ball and thrown it in the fireplace.

What did she think of Dominique? She had recognised her. She knew now that the tenant opposite was the stealthy silhouette of the Rue Montaigne and the dance-hall, and that those eyes trained on her from morning till night, were the dramatic eyes she had defied as she went into the little hotel in the Rue Lepic next door to the delicatessen.

A fanatic! Not exactly that, she realised, but she had other things to do besides trying to probe this mystery.

On the evening of the 11th of February the mulatto waited as usual in the angle of a doorway, smoking cigarettes while he waited for the light to go out in the third-

floor windows. The Rouets nearly always went to bed at the same hour. There were by then only a few minutes longer to wait.

However, that wait was too long, and Antoinette, in her nightgown, had to draw aside her bedroom curtain and remain there behind the window, gazing at her lover.

At length he had rung, the door had opened and he had gone up. He walked with an offensive liteness, an impudent assurance, which Dominique found unpleasant.

That night the Cailles offended her without knowing it. After dinner they had come back in company with a girl who had visited them two or three times before, but always during the day. They must have brought back some champagne, for the popping of corks had been heard. They were very gay. The gramophone had played unceasingly.

It was shocking and depressing to hear Lina's voice growing shriller as she became more intoxicated, and eventually she did nothing but laugh and laugh without stopping.

Not once did Dominique look through the keyhole. None the less she sensed the ambiguous excitement prevailing next door as she heard Albert Caille's voice pleading again and again:

"Yes, yes! . . . You'll stay . . . It's late . . . We'll squeeze you in . . ."

Suddenly he had switched off the light and she had heard them moving about, whispering and running into one another in the dark. There had been further laughter and feeble protests.

"Have you got enough room?"

The three of them had gone to bed together. They shifted about. Lina had been the first to fall silent, after the inevitable had occurred, and then, much later, Dominique had realised that the others were not asleep, and she had gone on listening to this secret life, stifled as it were in the sweaty warmth of the bed.

Why had it been a disappointment? In the end she had fallen asleep. A pale sun had greeted her in the morning. The sparrows of the Haussmann crossing cheeped in their tree. At eight o'clock Cécile had gone downstairs as she did every morning, and had drawn the second floor curtains, except in the bedroom, which she never entered until Antoinette rang for her.

Then Dominique had seen, at the same time as the servant did. On a little table in the boudoir which formed an antechamber to the bedroom were a man's hat, a grey felt hat and an overcoat.

Antoinette's lover had overslept that morning, as was bound to happen one day.

Her little eyes shining with pleasure, Cécile hurried to the floor above, where old Madame Rouet was not yet on duty in her tower.

"There is a man in Madame's bedroom!"

For a few seconds Dominique, without moving, lived through a whole drama. She had time to spare and she saw herself running down to the street and into the coal-seller's where there was a telephone.

"Hullo! It's a friend speaking . . . It doesn't matter who . . . The servant has seen the hat and the overcoat . . . She's gone up to tell Madame Rouet . . . She'll be coming down in a minute . . ."

All that passed through her imagination, but she did not stir.

Upstairs Madame Rouet and her husband were at breakfast. Were they arguing which of the two should go down?

It was she who went. Her husband remained in the flat. That morning he was not seen leaving the house for his unvarying walk to the Rue Coquillière.

"You'd better stay . . . In case . . ."

And Dominique saw Madame Rouet, leaning on her stick, enter the boudoir and sit down in the chair which Cécile pushed forward for her.

Were the two still asleep, or had they heard? Never had Madame Rouet been so still or so menacing. Her calm was colossal. It was as though she were living at last, down to the smallest crumb, the hour for which she had been preparing herself for years.

She had waited, confident that this hour would come. For months past, every day, at every meal, every time that Antoinette came up, she had gazed at her as if to assure herself that the moment was not far off now.

At half-past eight, at a quarter to nine, there had been no movement. Only at ten to nine was the bedroom curtain moved slightly, then fully drawn, and Dominique was able to see Antoinette, who had realised that she was caught in a trap.

She had not dared ring for her maid. She did not dare open the boudoir door either. She bent down to the key-hole, but through it she could only see the armchair in which her mother-in-law was on guard.

The man sat on the edge of the bed, anxious too

perhaps, but impudent none the less. And she jerked out at him nervously:

"Come on, get dressed! . . . What are you waiting for? . . ."

As he dressed, he smoked his first cigarette.

"Stay there . . . Don't budge . . . Or rather, no . . . Go into the bathroom . . . Keep calm, . . ."

Then, in her dressing-gown with its wide sleeves floating out, and her feet in blue satin mules, Antoinette took a deep breath and finally opened the door.

They were face to face. Old Madame Rouet did not flinch, did not look at her daughter-in-law but went on staring at the hat and overcoat on the little table.

Without a moment's thought, without any transition, Antoinette sprang violently to the attack, breaking loose on the very instant, and the outbreak reached its paroxysm at once.

"What are you doing here? . . . Answer! . . . You forget that this is my flat . . . It's still mine, what ever you may think . . . I order you to go, do you hear? . . . This is my flat, *mine*, and I'm entitled to do what I like here . . ."

Facing her a block of marble, a statue leaning on a rubber-tipped stick, a look of ice.

Antoinette, unable to stand still, walked up and down, letting the skirts of her dressing-gown float round her, restraining herself from breaking an ornament or hurling herself on her foe.

"I order you to leave . . . Can't you hear? . . . I've had enough! . . . Yes, I've had enough of you, of your pretences, of your family, of your house . . . I've had enough of . . ."

The man had left the bathroom door open, 'and Dominique could see him listening and still smoking.

Not for a second did Madame Rouet's lips move. She had nothing to say. Only the corners of her mouth turned down as a sign of deeper scorn, of unutterable disgust, as Antoinette in her desperation became more loathsome.

What need was there to hear the words? The gestures told quite enough—the attitudes, the hair flying in all directions, the heaving bosom.

"What are you waiting for? . . . To find out whether I have a lover? . . . Well, I have . . . A man! . . . a real man, not a miserable specimen like your son . . . Do you want to see him? . . . Is that what you're waiting for? . . . Pierre! . . . Pierre! . . ."

The man did not budge.

"Come on, let my mother-in-law take a good look at you! . . . Now are you satisfied? . . . Oh, I know what you're going to say . . . You own the house . . . What don't you own? . . . I shall go, of course . . . But not before I've told you what I think, not before I've unburdened myself . . . Yes, I have a lover . . . But you and your family, your frightful family, you're . . ."

Dominique was pale. For a second, as she strode vehemently to and fro, Antoinette's eye fell on her and she paused, appearing satisfied to be seen at that moment. She sneered and screamed the louder, while her lover moved towards the door and Madame Rouet still did not budge, waiting for it to be all over and for the house to be empty at last.

For a full half-hour Antoinette did not stop her agitated movement. She dressed, she went in and out of her

bedroom, sometimes addressing the man and sometimes her mother-in-law.

"I'm going, but . . ."

She was ready at last. She had put on her mink coat, the richness of which accorded ill with the intentional vulgarity of her attitude.

She reached the door, screamed another insult and took her companion's arm, but retraced her steps to spit out a coarse phrase at Cécile, whom she had overlooked and who was standing at the pantry door.

The street was quiet and the light was soft. Looking down, Dominique saw the couple come out of the house and watch for a taxi. It was Antoinette who gave the order and took charge of her companion.

As for Madame Rouet, she turned to Cécile and said:

"Shut the door . . . No . . . First go and fetch the master . . ."

He came down. A couple of sentences, no more, brought him up to date. Madame Rouet got up painfully from the armchair and then for nearly an hour she inspected the furniture and the drawers, collecting things that had belonged to her son. She was to be seen holding a watch and chain, photographs, cuff-links, various trifles of no value and even a silver fountain-pen.

She handed the booty to her husband.

"She'll be back. If I know her, she's gone to her mother's. Her mother will think about practical matters at once. Very soon they'll come back to fetch everything . . ."

She was quite right. At the Place Blanche the taxi stopped, the lover got out into the reassuring coolness of a familiar scene and made his way peaceably to a bar.

"I'll telephone you . . ."

The taxi climbed the Rue Caulaincourt. Antoinette's mother, a scarf around her greying hair, was doing her room in a fine cloud of luminous dust.

"Well, there it is!"

Despair. Anxiety,

"Why did you do it? . . ."

"Oh no, Mama, no sermons, please. I've had enough! I've had enough to drown me . . ."

"You've not rung up your sister? Perhaps you ought to ask her advice . . ."

For young Colette, of the lip with the candid, upward curve, of the innocent and heart-rending smile, was the family woman of business.

"Hullo . . . Yes . . . What d'you say? . . . D'you think so? . . . Yes, they're capable of that . . . Wait, I'll make a note . . . A pencil, please, Mama . . . Papin . . . pin . . . yes . . . valuer . . . what street? . . . All right, I've got it . . . Thank you . . . I don't yet know when . . . No, not at mama's . . . In the first place, there isn't room . . . Later . . . Yes, of course! . . . That's it . . . The stage I've got to . . ."

There was loud laughter at the Cailles', because Lina had a hangover and thought she was ill, and was fretful and in a temper.

"You're making fun of me . . . I know you're making fun of me . . . I was too hot all night . . . You neither of you stopped kicking . . ."

Across the way Cécile had opened all the windows of the flat, as if it were empty already.

At eleven o'clock a taxi pulled up. Antoinette got out, accompanied by her mother and a sadly dressed man who looked the house up and down, as if to draw up its

inventory. Behind them came a removal van of an aggressive yellow.

There was no question of lunch. In the course of three hours a clean sweep was made in the rooms, of which there now seemed to be only one. Furniture was dismantled, the valuer noted down everything that crossed the threshold and Antoinette seemed secretly to enjoy the sight of the furniture leaving piece by piece, the hangings disappearing from windows and doors and the parquet floor showing grey where the carpets had been ripped up.

Like a ferret she went round making sure nothing had been left. It was she who thought of wine for the removal men and went to the cellar. It was she too who noticed that certain objects were missing and, calling the valuer, dictated a list, pointing to the ceiling and accusing her mother-in-law.

A whole life being trampled on, being pillaged, being annihilated in one morning with great, swift strokes, with sadistic joy.

She brought such desperation to the business that her mother, who did not know what to do with herself, was scared and at her window Dominique's heart was wrung.

Dominique did not eat. She was not hungry, and she lacked the courage to go down and do her shopping.

The Cailles went out. A ray of sunshine had brought thoughts of spring, and Lina put on a light-coloured costume and sported a little red hat. Albert, extremely happy and proud, walked between her and the new girlfriend who had spent the night in their bed.

Mademoiselle Augustine's room up there had not yet been let. It was only a servant's bedroom, too far away from the street. Another old maid would have to be found

to live in it, but they had not troubled to put up the board, the concierge having thought it sufficient to tell the local tradesmen.

On the kerb a second van succeeded the first. Madame Rouet in her tower could hear the hubbub going on below her and, when the place was quite empty at last, when there was nothing left—not a stick of furniture, not a carpet, not a curtain, not, above all, a living soul—then she would go down in triumph to survey the field of battle.

At two o'clock Colette got out of a taxi and came and kissed her sister and her mother, but she did not linger. She showed no astonishment. She simply pointed to a chromium-plated lamp-stand and Antoinette shrugged her shoulders.

“Take it if you like!”

Was it Antoinette who gave the order? Or did the removal men take them with the rest of the things from the back room where they had been put? Anyway, Dominique saw a man in a smock cross the pavement carrying two green plants in pots, and they too disappeared into the crowded van.

There was one mistake. A dark green coat had been carried off with a jumble of other garments, and Cécile came down to get it, for it belonged to her. From a third-floor window she had seen it in the arms of one of the men, or else she had been mounting guard in the hall.

By five o'clock it was all over. Antoinette had made several telephone calls. She had drunk a glass of wine from one of the removal men's bottles, using one of their glasses after rinsing it out.

When all had gone, the only things left in the flat were bottles, one of them half-full, and dirty glasses set down on the floor.

Antoinette had forgotten her neighbour of the window opposite. Not a glance by way of farewell. It was only down below, on the pavement, that she remembered her and looked up, and her lips were curled in a mocking smile.

"Good-bye, old dear! I'm getting out of . . ."

The valuer had departed with his papers. He had arrived by taxi, but went off by bus, for which he had a long wait at the corner of the Boulevard Haussmann, near the tree where the birds lived.

"Aren't you hungry?" asked Antoinette's mother as they drove along.

She was always hungry. She loved everything eatable, above all lobster, foie gras, rich things and pastries.

Wasn't now the time, if ever, for eating?

"No, Mama . . . I must . . ."

She did not take her mother back to her own flat. She dropped her at the Place Clichy, slipping a note into her hand by way of consolation.

"Don't fuss . . . But of course I'll come and see you tomorrow . . . No, not in the morning . . . Don't you understand anything, then? . . . Graff's, driver . . ."

She condescended to wave a hand through the window. At Graff's she immediately picked out the man, who was waiting for her with a drink in front of him.

"Now, let's go and have dinner . . . Are you pleased? . . . Ooh! I can't feel my legs any more . . . Heavens, what a day! . . . What's the matter? . . . Are you upset? . . . Mama wanted me to move in with her, while I'm looking for a

little flat . . . I've had everything put in store . . . Water, a port! . . . My bag has been taken to your hotel . . ."

They dined in an Italian restaurant on the Boulevard Rochechouart. The sudden calm, the silence that surrounded them, left Antoinette unsettled, and several times anxiety, perhaps foreboding, betrayed itself in the covert glances she darted at her lover.

"Listen, tonight, to celebrate my freedom, I should like . . ."

They celebrated it in every dance place they could find; and the more champagne she drank the more excited Antoinette became and the shriller grew her voice. She had to let herself go. If she remained still for a moment, her nerves troubled her and a wild distress gripped her. She laughed, she danced, she talked at the top of her voice. She had to be the centre of attraction, deliberately creating scenes, and at four in the morning they were the last customers left in a little night-spot in the Rue Fontaine. She was weeping on the mulatto's shoulder like a little girl, whining, melting with pity for herself and for him.

"You understand, at least? . . . Tell me you understand . . . There's only us two left now, you see . . . There's nothing else . . . Tell me there's nothing but us two and kiss me, hold me tight . . ."

"The waiter's looking at us."

She insisted on trying to drink one more bottle, but she knocked it over, and her mink was thrown over her shoulders. She stumbled on the kerb, the man put his arm round her waist to hold her up and suddenly, near a gas-lamp, she leaned over and was sick. Tears, but not from weeping, started from her eyes as she tried to laugh once more and repeated: "

"It's nothing . . . It's nothing . . ."

Then, clinging to her lover, who kept his head turned away:

"I don't disgust you, do I? . . . Swear that I don't disgust you, that I never will disgust you . . . Because now, you know . . ."

He helped her one step at a time up the stairs of the Hotel Beauséjour in the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, where he rented a bedroom and bathroom by the week.

In the Rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré the windows remained open on emptiness all night, and Dominique's first sensation on waking in the morning was of the emptiness opposite with which she was henceforward to live.

Then there came back to her a forgotten memory—a memory of the time when she was a little girl, the time of her mother and of her father the general, when they were moving house on transferring from one garrison to another. They often used to move house and each time, when she saw the house being emptied, she kept as close as possible to the front door for fear of being overlooked.

Antoinette had not overlooked her, since she had glanced up at the moment when she left.

She had gone, and she had left Dominique behind on purpose.

Dominique lit the gas mechanically to warm up her coffee, and she thought of old Mademoiselle Augustine, who had also gone, but had run after the train to come and tell her, still panting with the joy of her deliverance.

V

The day began like any other, with nothing to suggest that it would be out of the ordinary. Far otherwise. At the outset the air was so clear and mild, and Dominique was so much in tune with it, that there seemed to be good hope of recovery.

It was the 3rd of March. She did not realise it at once, because she had forgotten to tear the leaf off the calendar. It was not yet spring, but already she would open her window wide in the morning, while the shutters elsewhere were still closed, waiting for the songs of the birds and the sound of the fountain in the old house near by. The fresh, slightly damp, morning air had a tang that recalled the vegetable-filled market place of some little town, early in the season though it was, and aroused a longing for fruit.

She did indeed think of fruit that morning—of plums, to be precise. It was a memory of childhood, in a town she had lived in, she could not now remember which, a market place she had crossed with her father in full uniform. She was in her Sunday best in a white frock stiff with starch. The general was leading her by the hand. She could see his sabre glinting in the sun. Veritable walls of plums extended on either side. The air smelt so strongly of plums that their scent followed her into the church where she was attending a *Te Deum*. The church doors had been left open. There were a great many flags. Men in civilian clothes were wearing arm-bands.

It was odd. At any moment now she would be seized

thus by a childhood memory and sink happily into it. Sometimes, as on that morning, she would even think in the same fashion as when she was a little girl. Thus, the sun was rising a little earlier each morning and each evening the lights had to be put on a little later. Then Dominique said to herself, as if announcing a certainty:

"When we can have dinner in the evening without the lights on, I shall be saved!"

That had once been her idea of the way the year went. There were the months, long and dark as a tunnel, during which you sat down to table under the lighted lamp, and the months during which you could walk in the garden after the evening meal.

Her mother, who used to think that each winter would be her last, used not to reckon in quite the same fashion. For her, it was the month of May that constituted the critical stage.

"Soon May will be here and things will be better."

So on that morning, as on the others, she lived half in the reality of the present, half among the memories of other days. She saw the empty flat opposite, still not let, a touch of pink on the house-fronts, a forgotten geranium in a pot on Mademoiselle Augustine's windowsill. She heard the early noises of the street, and inhaled a passing whiff of coffee. But at the same time she thought she could catch the bugle calls, the noise her father made getting up in the morning, his spurs ringing in the corridor, the door he could never learn to shut quietly. A quarter of an hour before the general left, his horse could be heard in front of that same door, pawing the ground while an orderly held it by the bridle.

She was filled with melancholy because all the recollec-

tions that came back to her were very old—all without exception from before her sixteenth birthday, as if only the first years had counted, as if the rest had been merely a long succession of tasteless days which left nothing behind.

Was life just that? A brief, unconscious childhood, a short adolescence, then emptiness, a tangle of troubles, worries and trivial cares, and now so soon, at forty, the feeling of being old, of a slope to be descended without happiness or joy?

The Cailles were going to leave her. They were to go on the 15th of March. It was not Albert Caille who had given her this news. He knew it would cause her pain and he did not dare do that to her, he was too much of a coward. He had sent Lina. They had whispered together, as always in such circumstances. He had pushed her towards the door, and Lina, as she came in, had looked more than ever like a pink doll stuffed with bran, or a little school-girl who has forgotten her recitation.

"I must tell you, Mademoiselle Salès . . . Now that my husband is contributing regularly to a paper, he will need an office, perhaps a secretary . . . We have been flat-hunting . . . We have found one on the Quai Voltaire, with windows looking on to the Seine, and we move in on the 15th of March . . . We shall always have the happiest recollections of our stay with you and of all your many kindnesses . . ."

They got up earlier and ranged about the city, setting their new flat to rights, excited and radiant, and coming back now only to sleep, as if in an hotel room. Sometimes even they would not come back at all, and then doubtless they shook down on a mattress in their new dwelling.

Dominique moved about, performing the same actions one after another, just as one unrolls a skein; and it was in truth the best part of her day, because there was a long-established rhythm to carry her along.

She looked at the time by the little watch hanging above the silk slipper. Her mother's gold watch, ornamented with brilliants, made her think of the calendar, and she tore off the leaf of the day before, to uncover a great black figure 3.

It was the anniversary of her mother's death. That year too she had talked of the month of May as the haven she hoped to reach, but she had been seized with suffocation towards the end of a wet day.

Dominique could think of her mother now without regret. She could picture her pretty well, though not in detail. In particular she pictured a fragile outline, a long face always bent slightly forward, a being whose flame always burnt low, as it were; and she was not stirred, but called up the picture coldly, perhaps even with a touch of resentment: This incapacity, so to speak, for living—for she fully realised that she was impotent in the face of life—it was her mother who had inculcated it on her, along with an elegant resignation, a refined self-effacement and all these trivial activities which availed only to palliate loneliness.

She saw Monsieur Rouet setting off. She looked at the sky, which was clear and bright, but in which she could sense a kind of false promise.

The fine weather was not the sort to last all day. The yellow of the sun was too pale, the blue was false and the white of the clouds harboured shadows of rain.

Towards midday, she knew instinctively, the sky would

be entirely overcast and then, long before dinner-time, there would descend on the city that distressing twilight which drifts along the streets like a mysterious dust.

Nervous and uneasy, she felt the urge, God knows why, to do her spring-cleaning; and she got through a good part of the day at close quarters with buckets of water, brushes and dusters. By three o'clock she had nearly done polishing the furniture.

She already knew what was going to happen—at least what was going to happen almost immediately.

When there was nothing left for her to do, when, with a ritual gesture, she set the stocking basket on the table, when the light began to take on a leaden hue, she would be seized by an anguish that she had learnt to know only too well.

Did not the same sort of thing happen to Monsieur Rouet, in his queer office in the Rue Cbquillière? And the summons was the more peremptory on days of rain, when evenings fell more quickly and uncertain lights gave the street a different look.

He too was doubtless trying to resist, crossing and un-crossing his legs and mastering the trembling of his fingers. He too would get up shamefacedly and say in a voice not quite his own:

"I must go to the bank, Bronstein . . . If my wife should telephone . . ."

He would slip down the stairs. Seized with giddiness, he would make his way towards the narrowest, dirtiest, streets, where the shadowy corners reeked of vice, and there edge along by the damp walls.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and buttered a slice of bread, as if that was going to hold her back. She had

scarcely sat down again and was about to put the varnished wood egg into a stocking, when the summons became irresistible and she dressed herself, taking care not to look at her reflection in the mirror.

On the stairs she wondered whether she had locked her door. At any other time she would have gone back at the least doubt. Why not today?

She waited for the bus, then stood on the back platform between the hard forms of men smelling of tobacco. But *it* had not yet begun, *it* would only begin much further on, in accordance with rules that never varied.

She got out at the Place Clichy. It was not raining, and yet there was a veil round the gas-lamps, a halo in front of the lighted shop-windows. All at once, she entered a new life, where vast illuminated signs were the guiding marks.

Ten times, perhaps more often, she had gone out in this way, shrunken and taut-nerved, and each time her gait had been the same, hurrying along, not knowing where she was going; each moment she had wanted to stop and out of shame had pretended not to see anything around her, and yet, like a thief, she had gulped in the life flowing by her on every side.

Ten times she had fled her room, so still at this hour that the stillness weighed on her like an agony. Two or three times she had gone at the same pace to the neighbourhood of the Markets, into those alleys where she had followed Monsieur Rouet: but most often it was here that she had come to prowl with the hungry eyes of a beggar-woman.

Furtive, conscious of her downfall, she rubbed shoulders with the crowd, sniffing at its odour. Without her realis-

ing it, the ritual had already become established. She always crossed the Place at the same spot, went round such-and-such a street-corner, recognised the smell of certain little bars and shops, slackened her pace at particular crossroads where the scent was stronger than elsewhere.

She was feeling so wretched that she could have whimpered as she walked. She was alone, more alone than anyone else. What would happen if she were to fall down in the gutter? A passer-by would stumble over her body. A few people would stop, she would be carried into a chemist's shop and a policeman would take his notebook and undo its elastic band.

"Who is it?"

No one would know.

Would she see Antoinette today again? She had found her in the end. It was in search of her that, the first few times, she had come to wander about the neighbourhood.

But why did her eyes burrow deep into all those warm mouths, the lobbies of hotels? By some of these doors women waited. Dominique would rather not have looked at them, but the urge was too strong for her. Some were tired, their patience almost gone: others looked her calmly in the eyes, seeming to say:

"What does *she* want with me?"

And it seemed to Dominique that she could recognise by their walk, by something stealthy and embarrassed about them, the men whom desire was driving towards one of those corridors. They would brush past her too. Sometimes in the darkness between two shop-windows or two street-lamps someone had leaned over her to make out her face, and she had not been shocked. She had been

unable to feel shocked. She had shivered, and then walked on for a minute or two seeing nothing, as though her eyes had been shut.

She was alone. Antoinette was treating her with scorn. It had happened once. It might perhaps happen again today.

Some evenings Dominique would see her sitting solitary in a bar in the Place Blanche, starting every time the door opened or the telephone bell rang.

He would not come. Or he kept her waiting for hours on end. She would buy an evening paper, open her bag, take out her powder compact and lipstick. Her eyes had changed. Though the same excitement haunted them, it was tinged now with anxiety, perhaps even weariness.

But today he was there. There were four of them round a table, two men and two women. Exactly like that evening when Antoinette had nudged her lover's elbow and drawn his attention to the window with a jerk of her chin.

"Look!"

It was Dominique whom she had been inviting her companions to look at—Dominique with her face almost glued to the glass—and who had disappeared into the blackness of the street.

Why did Antoinette now have these fits of vulgar laughter, quivering with defiance? And that anxiety, terror rather, when she looked at the man who was playing so coolly with her.

Had he already threatened to leave her? Was he running after other women? Had he left her alone for whole nights in their room in the Hotel Beauséjour?

Dominique could divine, could feel all that, and she was driven by an urge to bear her part of it. Had not

Antoinette gone down on her knees in front of him, had she not, bare-breasted and half-naked, grovelling at his feet—had she not savagely threatened to kill him?

Sure of himself, contemptuous and sardonic, he had complete mastery over her. That was clear from his every look and gesture, still clearer when he looked at his watch—a new wrist-watch she had given him—and got up, setting a grey felt hat carefully on his woolly hair.

“Be seeing you—you know where . . .”

“You won’t be too late?”

His fingers touched those of his comrade, the two men exchanged a wink, he tapped the other girl on the shoulder and a pathetic look followed him to the door. Then Antoinette felt moved to hide her anxiety by renewing her make-up.

It would not last for ever. Not even for years. A few months longer?

Perhaps she would not kill him.

And then, a panting she-animal, she would howl her pain and hate, following him in wild pursuit, only to be stopped at the entries to cafés and dance-halls, by waiters or porters who had been warned against her.

Did she see Dominique that evening? The man-friend suggested a game to calm her after her lover had gone. He called to the waiter for a cloth and tards, making room on the marble table-top by pushing aside the glasses filled with a greenish apéritif.

Dominique was on the move again, brushing her shoulders against the walls, repelling the ever-recurring memory of two banks of plums in baskets and a *Te Deum* welling out through wide-open cathedral doors.

The flat in the Faubourg Saint Honoré was empty,

utterly empty. The single leg had gone out long since and there was not a thing stirring. There would be nothing save chilly air to welcome her home.

Even the women she saw standing at hotel doors must be less lonely, even the men hesitating before accosting them.

Everything around her was aliye, but in her there was only her heart, beating uselessly like an alarm clock forgotten in a suit-case.

A few weeks more . . . The sun would be shining at that time of day . . . Night would not fall till later, after dinner, nights bringing peace . . .

Where was she? A short while before she had recognised the windows of the Hotel Beauséjour and now she was going down a dark, sloping street, where buses and cars did not run. She looked at a cobbler in his little shop. She brushed against a shadow she had failed to see and the head turned towards her. She was frightened. Her fear increased so suddenly that she wanted to scream. Someone had come up to her, someone she could not clearly see was walking in step with her, someone was touching her—a hand, a man's hand, was gripping her arm. She was being spoken to, though she could not understand the words. All her blood had ebbed and she was defenceless. She knew—she realised clearly—what was happening to her, and what was most extraordinary was that she accepted it in advance.

Had she always foreseen that one day she would walk thus in the darkness of a street step for step with an unknown man? Had she lived it in a dream? Did it only come from having witnessed the same thing, from having followed Antoinette, from having stared wide-eyed as the

two shapes, with one and the same movement, plunged into the dim light of a corridor?

She felt no astonishment. She was submissive. She did not dare look at the man but she noted a strong smell of a cigar that had gone out.

Already she had crossed a threshold. On the right there was a round window and behind it, someone in shirt-sleeves, a blue coffee-pot on a gas-ring.

What had he said? He had reached out a hairy arm and handed over a key which she had not taken. Yet she was now on the stairs, she was climbing, she must have stopped breathing and her heart had ceased to beat. She was still climbing, there was a carpet beneath her feet, a night-light. She felt a warm breath at her back, a hand—the hand—touched her again and moved up her leg, reaching the naked flesh above her stocking.

Then as she reached the next floor, quite out of breath, she turned. She saw first a bowler hat and a middle-aged man's commonplace features. He was smiling. He had a reddish moustache. Then the smile was wiped out and she knew that he was as astonished as she was. She went rigid and she had to push him back with both hands to force a passage down the stairs which he was blocking with his bulk. She ran, ran at a fantastic speed, so it seemed to her. The street seemed very far away and she thought she would never regain the pavements, the lighted shops and the great, comforting buses.

When she did stop, she found herself in the forecourt of the Gare Saint Lazare, just when the throng was at its thickest and all the clerks and workmen of Paris were rushing to catch their suburban trains.

Mechanically she glanced behind her once more, but

she had not been followed. She was alone, quite alone, jostled by the hurrying crowds all round her.

Then, half-aloud, she stammered:

"It's all over."

She could not yet have said what was all over. Empty and hollow, she started walking again. The taste of stale cigar was in her mouth and the smell of that hotel staircase clung to her—the smell of that lobby where in the half-dark she had caught a glimpse of an apathetic chambermaid's white apron.

So that was how it was!

"My poor Nique!"

She was clear-headed, terribly clear-headed.

Yes, it was all over. What was the use? There wasn't even any need to hurry. It was all over, quite over! And how little it had amounted to! You imagine that life . . . "Spring term" . . . Yet another phrase from her childhood . . . They used to talk of the spring term as a stage that would never come to an end . . . The term before the Easter holidays . . .

For quite a time it is too long, the days never finish and the weeks are an eternity with Sunday's sun far away at the end, and then suddenly nothing is left—just months and years made up of hours and days all jumbled together in confusion, with nothing standing out at all.

"Come on! It's all over . . ."

She might well feel pity for herself. It was all over. It's all over, my poor Nique.

You didn't do it. You will never do it, you won't live to be a poor old maid like Mademoiselle Augustine either . . .

A pity Antoinette didn't even look at you today!

The well-known pavements, the house she had entered so many, many times, the Audebal's shop, Sutton's where they sold wicker cases for people going on journeys.

A little higher up the street there was a flower-shop, and Dominique went past her own house to it. Rain had begun to fall and the drops made long diagonal streaks across the window.

"Give me some . . .

She would have liked daisies. The word had just sprung naturally to her lips, but look around her as she might, she could not see any daisies like those she used to arrange in a vase, thinking the while of Jacques Améraud.

"Some what, madame?"

"Not madame, mademoiselle . . ."

. . . Jacques Améraud . . . Old Madame Améraud, who . . .

"Roses . . . A lot of roses . . ."

If only she had enough money on her. She paid. It was the last time she would count out notes and coins.

If only the Cailles were still out. She bore them no ill-will, but they had hurt her. They were not responsible. They were going their own way. They thought they were getting somewhere . . .

Was it just for the sake of speaking once more to a human being that she pushed the lodge-door ajar?

"Nothing for me?"

"No, mademoiselle."

She had not thought of the roses. The concierge looked at them in astonishment and Dominique smiled apologetically, a very gentle smile.

She was gentle, that was her character, the character her mother had formed for her. She made no noise on the

stairs. She had been taught to go upstairs quietly, not to disturb people, to keep out of the way . . .

To keep out of the way! From what a distance that expression came back to her! That was indeed it. She had kept out of the way! Now she was going to get even further out of the way . . .

Before drawing the curtains, she took a last look at the windows opposite. She raised her head a little and saw old Madame Rouet in her tower.

. . . The tower mounts guard . . .

Her eyes became wet. She turned on the light and looked at herself, standing before the glass.

Still, she was not an old maid yet.

She unbuttoned her frock. The glass disappeared because she had opened the wardrobe. She still possessed a long nightdress trimmed with Valenciennes lace, a nightdress she had worked at for three months once upon a time.

"For when you get married. . ."

She still had a bottle of amber-coloured eau-de-Cologne in a drawer.

Dominique gave a wry little smile. She hurried a little, for she felt a kind of revolt beginning to spring up in her. She was beginning to wonder whether somebody was not responsible for . . .

The tube . . . Where was the tube? . . . She had bought it three years earlier, when migraines were keeping her awake all night . . . She had only taken it once . . .

Why! She had done her spring-cleaning that very morning. The room smelt clean. The furniture was gleaming. She counted the tablets, dropping them into a glass of water . . . Eight . . . Nine . . . Ten . . . Eleven . . .

Would that be enough?

Yet if she wanted . . . if . . .

No! Not now that she knew . . .

"Oh God, I beg, grant that . . ."

She had drunk. She lay down. Her chest was rather tight, because of the bitterness of the medicine. She had scattered eau-de-Cologne over the bed, and, once lying down, she arranged the roses about her.

When one of her little schoolfellows had died and had been thus surrounded with flowers, the mothers had said through their tears:

"She looks like an angel!"

Was the drug working already? She did not stir, did not feel the slightest desire to stir—she who had always had a horror of lying in bed. She heard all the noises of the street, waited for the clatter of the buses, the grinding noise they made when changing gear at the foot of the slope. She wanted to hear once more the ringing of the bell in Audebal's shop.

Why, she had forgotten something! She had forgotten the one thing that mattered, and now it was too late!

Antoinette would not know.

She would so much have liked . . . What would she so much have liked? . . . What was she thinking of? . . . She was ill . . . No, it was only that her tongue was becoming bigger, was swelling inside her mouth, but it did not matter, it did not hurt . . .

"It doesn't hurt, darling . . ."

Who used to say that? . . . Her mother . . . Yes, her mother, when she had grazed herself, and iodine was being put on the place . . .

No, it didn't hurt . . . Had it hurt Jacques Améraud? . . .

Where had she been? . . . She had been to look for something, somewhere, very far away . . . Yes, it was already very far away . . . Had she found . . . ?

She could not tell any more . . . It was silly that she could not tell any more . . . The whole family would be properly caught . . . At Toulon, that last time, she had felt no love for them . . . What was it they had done to her again? . . . She had forgotten . . . Perhaps it was because they had gone off and left her all alone . . . They did not seem to see her . . . The proof of their not seeing her was the way they said:

"You haven't changed, Nique!"

Who was calling her Nique? She was alone. She had always been alone.

Perhaps, if she were given sixteen drops of the medicine on the side-table . . . Why did Antoinette stay behind the door, instead of coming to pour out the drops?

You're a little fool, Nique! . . . You know you've always been told you were a little fool . . . With all your grand notions you used to forget the one thing that mattered . . . You've already forgotten that you hadn't warned Antoinette . . . She's away up there in the café . . . She's playing a game of cards . . .

You even forgot that the roses would smell bad. Flowers always smell bad in a room where there is a dead body . . .

When the Cailles come in . . . They won't know . . . They'll think the house is the same as ever . . . Perhaps they'll just remark that they don't hear you scurrying about like a mouse, as you usually do. But that'll be all the same to them, they'll undress, they'll cling to each other and sighs will be heard . . .

There'll be no one to hear them . . . In the morning, perhaps . . .

Albert Caille will be frightened. They'll whisper together. He'll say to Lina:

"Go on, you go! . . ."

He'll give her a push . . .

It's a dirty trick to play them, seeing they have less than a fortnight left to live in the house. They won't even know, whom they should send telegrams to.

They'll all be obliged to catch trains, from Rennes, from Toulon, from Angoulême. Luckily they still have their mourning!

"To think that the last time we saw her, at Aunt Clémentine's funeral, she looked so . . ."

"I thought she looked just a little bit unhappy . . ."

Why? It was not true. She had never been unhappy.

She had kept her promise, that was all. Now she must hasten to tell Antoinette.

It was easy . . . In a few minutes, in a few seconds, it would be all over, and then she would do what Mademoiselle Augustine had done. She would hurry away to Antoinette's side and cry out to her, quivering with joy:

"See! . . . I've come . . . It was you I wanted to see first of all, do you understand? . . . I couldn't tell you, before . . . I used to look at you from a long way off and you didn't understand . . . Now that it's all over . . ."

She blushed . . . Was she still capable of blushing? She was in a muddle. A cold shiver gripped her whole being . . .

Yes . . . a few seconds yet, four, three, two . . . nothing

more . . . Very soon now she would be clasping Antoinette in her arms, leaning over her face, over her lips that were so alive, so alive . . .

So al . . .

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"Don't worry about Pierre, my dear. So long as he said he'd come, he'll come . . ."

Antoinette did her best to smile. It was midnight. She was left alone in a corner of a bar, and, as she caught sight of herself in a mirror, she looked to herself like a woman waiting for just anybody.

Monsieur Rouet got up out of his armchair and began to undress, while his wife, leaning on her stick, set the room to rights.

She had telephoned to the Rue Coquillière and he had not been there. She was waiting for him to go to sleep so that she could count the notes in his wallet. As though he did not know and did not take his precautions!

He had borrowed a hundred francs from Bronstein.

He had worked so hard all his life to earn his money!

He had had no luck, just now. When the little trollop had undressed and lain down on a red eiderdown, he had seen tiny pimples all along her meagre thighs, and he had taken fright.

There was no sound now in Dominique's room but the ticking of the alarm clock. When the Cailles came in at last, they did not notice. They undressed and went to bed, but they were too tired after an entire day spent papering their future home.

She just said, in the voice of one asleep already:

"Not tonight . . ."

He did not insist. Minutes passed.

"About the thousand francs key money, I think if we were to ask Ralet . . ."

Lina was asleep.

The rain fell softly, soundlessly.

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